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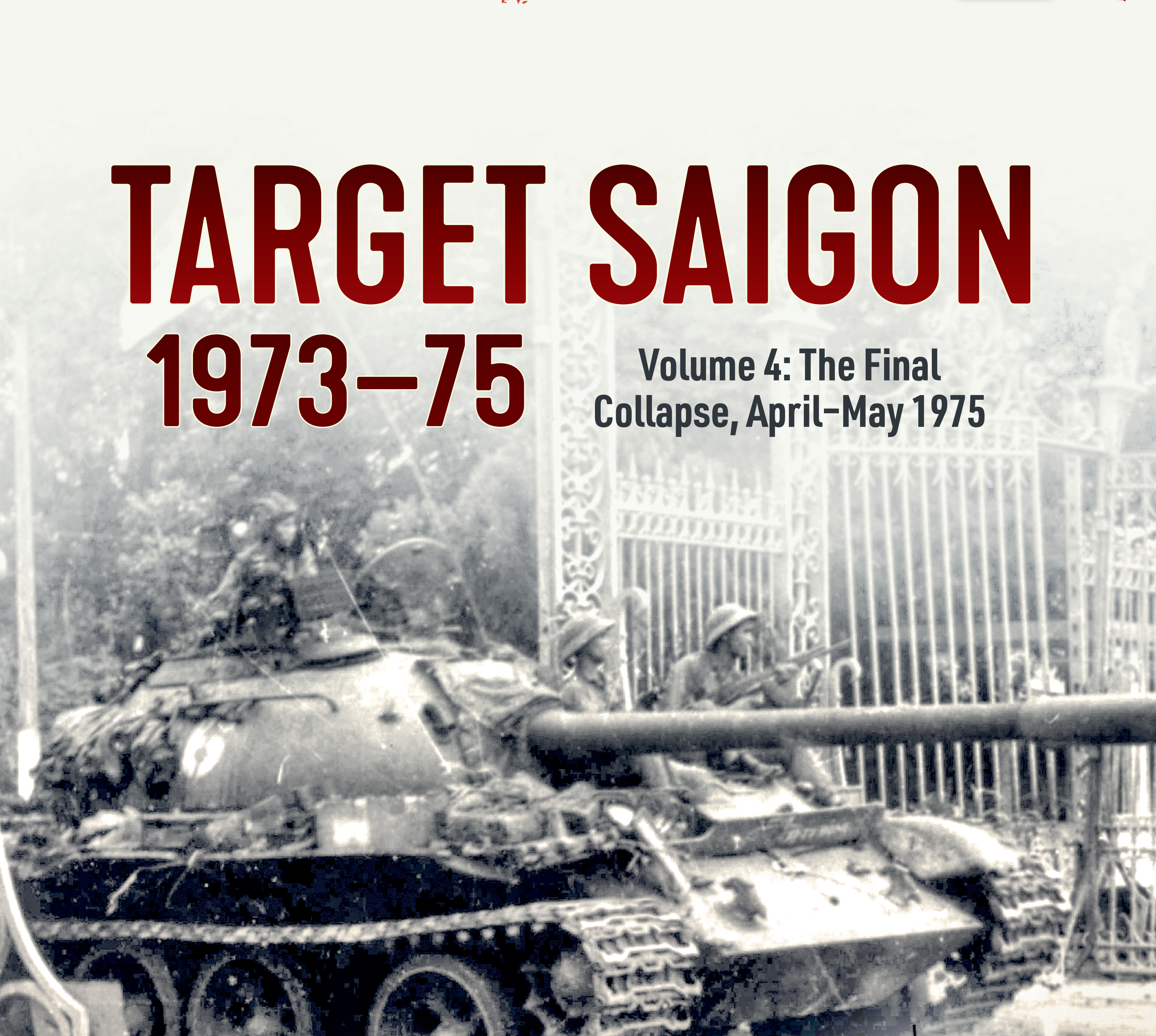
TARGET SAIGON 1973–75

Volume 4: The Final Collapse, April–May 1975



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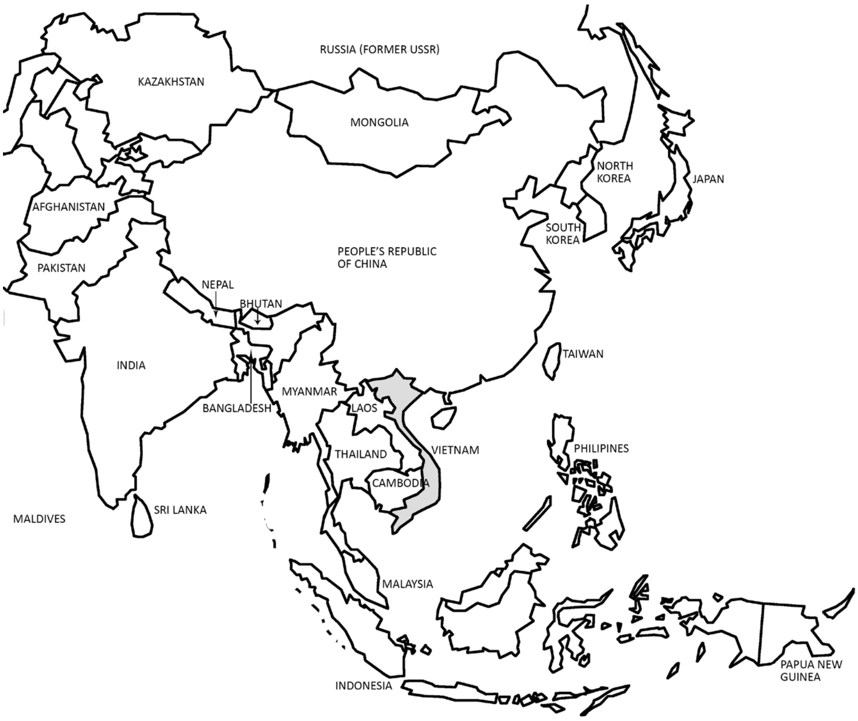
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Note: In order to simplify the use of this book, all names, locations and geographic designations are as provided in *The Times World Atlas*, or other traditionally accepted major sources of reference, as of the time of described events.

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ABBREVIATIONS

AA	anti-aircraft
AB	Air Base
ACR	Armoured Cavalry Regiment
ACS	Armoured Cavalry Squadron
APC	Armoured Personnel Carrier
ARVN	Army of the Republic of Vietnam (South Vietnamese Army)
CO	Commanding Officer
PAVN	People's Army of Vietnam (North Vietnamese Army)
RF/PF	Regional Forces/People's Forces (ARVN)
SAC	Strategic Army Corps
SAM	Surface-to-air missile
SP	Self-propelled (artillery)
USAF	United States Air Force
VNAF	Vietnamese Air Force (Air Force of South Vietnam)
VNN	Vietnamese Navy (Navy of South Vietnam)

INTRODUCTION

After two protracted years of fighting, after the "Peace Accords" signed in January 1973 in Paris, which wore down the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN), the North Vietnamese decided to launch their final campaign to conquer the South in January 1975 (see previous volumes of *Target Saigon*). With shrinking American support, South Vietnamese President Nguyen Van Thieu decided in the meantime upon a vast redeployment to regroup his dilapidated forces into a truncated South Vietnam centred on Saigon and the Mekong Delta. The withdrawals turned into routs in the Central Highlands and around Hue and Da Nang (See *Target Saigon* volumes 2 and 3). Planning to take at least two years to conquer the South, the Communists now speedily sent their whole regular battle corps, some 550,000 troops and 700 tanks, to converge upon Saigon. The capture of the city would lead to some of the fiercest fighting of the Vietnam War.

1

PRELIMINARY OPERATIONS AROUND SAIGON

In the initial North Vietnamese two year-plan for conquering South Vietnam the PAVN B2 Front that covered most of the southern half of South Vietnam would play only a minor role. Although it encompassed the operational areas of the ARVN III Corps, around Saigon, and IV Corps, the Mekong Delta, and being the most important North Vietnamese operational command in the South, it was assigned only a support role in the coming campaign. The intention was to tie down the ARVN forces in place while the main offensive would be carried out in the Central Highlands. Despite stiff opposition from the commander of the B2 Front, Lieutenant General Tran Van Tra, who wanted his command to have the honour of carrying out the main offensive, Giap downplayed his demands. Tra argued that he needed enough forces to prevent the ARVN from withdrawing into defensive "enclaves" in the southern half of South Vietnam. Particularly, he feared that the enemy would retreat into well defended redoubts that would indefinitely prolong the war. Instead of his forces making frontal assaults that would push the enemy back from one line of resistance to another, he would isolate them in their outlying defensive positions. The purpose was to prevent the ARVN from pulling back into Saigon, a huge city that would need costly street fighting to conquer.

In essence, Tra wanted to cut Saigon off from the surrounding countryside by blocking the roads in all four directions on the capital's periphery, far enough away to avoid heavy fighting yet still close enough to isolate the city. Back in 1964, Tra had already envisaged a five-pronged assault against Saigon, but he did not have the strength to launch a direct attack. His attempt in 1968 during the Tet Offensive ended in disaster. But now with the ARVN weakening, he sought to soften up Saigon's outer defences through a series of battles to wear down the enemy and to conquer places where he could position his forces for an offensive directly against the city.

Tra's plan condensed all the 1975 goals for Phase Two and Three, crafted by Giap, together into a new Phase Two. Tra told his commanders that if Communist forces were victorious in the Central Highlands, the situation could change rapidly, and a strategic opportunity might arise. He wanted to be ready if it did. If the situation developed more slowly, his secondary objectives would be to link separate "liberated" areas into a contiguous zone and prepare secure areas for future assaults. With the backing of Le Duan, Tra continued to persist in wanting three or four more divisions to reinforce his units to implement his plan. Finally, Giap sent him a single strategic reserve unit, the 341st Division. He also sent in additional armour and artillery to bolster the 4th SAC. Created in July 1974 and under command of Major General Hoang Cam, the new Corps was made up of the 7th and 9th Divisions, the 429th Assault Sapper Regiment, the 24th Artillery Regiment, and the 71st Anti-Aircraft Artillery Regiment. It could be bolstered by the brigade-sized 26th Armoured Group as well as, if required, the newly created divisions by grouping independent regiments of the B2 Front. In the Communists' Military Region 8 (the northern Mekong Delta), Tra indeed created the 8th and 303rd Divisions. In his plan, he assigned them the important task of isolating Saigon from the rice-rich upper Delta by cutting Route 4 and by creating a continuous liberated zone from southern Tay Ninh and the Angel's Wing area in Cambodia to the Plain of Reeds in Long An Province. However, these units were mainly infantry-only divisions, lacking in artillery and transportation, and for the moment the 4th SAC was the weakest of the PAVN Corps.

Military Region 9 (the southern Delta) would focus on disrupting operations at the large VNAF airbase of Binh Thuy (Can Tho City) and seizing territory. Military Region 6 (MR-6), the sparsely populated and long-neglected northern edge of the B2 Front, was also given a significant role in Tra's new plan. He wanted MR-6 to destroy all ARVN positions from Binh Tuy Province on the coast to Lam Dong and Tuyen Duc Provinces in the middle of South Vietnam. But the only regular unit available was the 812th Regiment. The heart of the B2 Front was MR-7, which covered most of the ARVN III Corps, and assigned to the 4th SAC. Tra decided to split the Corps in two to operate in different sectors. The first sector was northwest of Saigon assigned to the 9th Division, with the 26th Armoured Group, initially attacking the critical Tri Tam district headquarters near Tay Ninh City. The second sector was a large zone northeast of Saigon, from Route 20 north to Dalat in the southern Central Highlands, and from Long Khanh Province along Route 1 into Binh Tuy Province. The 7th Division, in coordination with the recently created 6th Division and the 812th Regiment of MR-6, would seize Lam Dong and Tuyen Duc Provinces. Tra also assigned the B2 Front's 75th Artillery Group, a brigade-sized unit with five artillery regiments, to support the offensive. Facing the VNAF, the attacking forces would be covered by the 377th Anti-Aircraft Artillery Division, with 15 battalions.

Tra's incessant prodding finally began to pay dividends in late February 1975. The General Headquarters sent additional support units that enabled him to create a second Corps. Group 232 was made up of the 5th and 303rd Divisions, commanded by Major General Nguyen Minh Chau. The Corps was reinforced by three artillery battalions, equipped respectively with 85mm guns, 122mm howitzers, and 130mm guns. Group 232's mission, bolstered by the 8th Division, was to launch an offensive to the south and west of Saigon. The 8th Division would strike in the heavily populated Dinh Tuong Province in the Delta. The 303rd Division would attack from the west and destroy the well-entrenched ARVN territorial forces from the Cambodian border. The 5th Division, minus its 3rd Regiment, would not participate. The division was kept in reserve, the unit had been devastated by heavy losses in the December 1974 fighting and was still recuperating.

The CO of the ARVN III Corps, Lieutenant General Nguyen Van Toan, probably the best South Vietnamese armoured operations specialist reacted quickly thanks to excellent intelligence that had roughly predicted the North Vietnamese intentions. But having no reserve left, he characteristically decided to displace his regular units by air from one threatened area to another, even at the risk of depriving an important sector of its forces. He bet on superior intelligence to predict enemy movement by allocating each ARVN division of the III Corps a radio intercept team of 20 specialists. He relied on the regional forces to cover the exposed positions. He used the 3rd Armoured Brigade as a reserve for counterattacking, though had to do so with limited mobility due to fuel constraints on both ARVN and VNAF.

He quickly reshuffled the disposition of his main units. The 25th Division, formerly responsible for defending Tay Ninh and Hau Nghia provinces would now focus solely on Tay Ninh. The defence of Hau Nghia was turned over to the RF/PF. The 5th Division would concentrate on the area north of Saigon. The 18th Division would deploy one regiment to Xuan Loc and one regiment to Tanh Linh – Hoai Duc, leaving one regiment free as an immediate Corps reserve. In early March 1975, Toan launched a series of spoiling attacks but did not deter the B2 Front from launching its own attacks. The main blow came to the northwest of Saigon with a twin attack by the 9th and the 303rd divisions to cut off and envelop Tay Ninh City.

In the north of the pincer was the 9th Division that would seize the district capital of Tri Tam, located on Route 239. It would then clear away the RF positions east to the Saigon River. Tra hoped that the capture of Tri Tam would further isolate An Loc and Chon Thanh, and even lead to their abandonment. The southern PAVN pincer, the 303rd Division, would take the district town of Ben Cau and clear away all the RF outposts from the Cambodian border east to the Vam Co Dong River. Three Tay Ninh Communist local-force battalions would sever Route 22 to prevent ARVN from using the road and bringing reinforcements. Ben Cau, which occupied an important crossroads around swampy terrain, would also be conquered. If the offensive was successful, Tay Ninh City, a place of great symbolic importance, being the seat of the Cao Dai religious sect, would be surrounded. The PAVN would also create a jumping-off position to re-enter the Iron Triangle, scene of heavy fighting the previous year.

On 10 March, concurrent with the attack on Ban Me Thout in the Central Highlands, the PAVN 9th Division, reinforced by the independent 16th Regiment, the 22nd Tank Battalion, two anti-aircraft artillery battalions and a dozen artillery pieces, including a battery of M-46 130mm long-range guns, opened the offensive against Tri Tam. Meanwhile, the local Viet Cong battalions attacked along Local Route 22. Tri Tam was defended by three RF battalions and nine PF platoons. Even though the RF repulsed them in most places, the Communists seized a section of the road and held it for several days. At Tri Tam, the South Vietnamese Territorials

T-54s of the 22nd Tank Battalion, 26th Armoured Group, advancing towards Tri Tam, southwest of Tay Ninh, on 10 March 1975, in support of the PAVN 9th Division. (PAVN)

The South Vietnamese Regional Force troops defending Tri Tam had flooded the surrounding countryside to try to slow down the North Vietnamese tanks. (PAVN)

Simultaneously with the attack against Tri Tam, an armoured battalion supported the attack of the PAVN 303rd Division against Ben Cau, southwest of Tay Ninh. The unit was equipped with PT-76 tanks and captured M113 APCs. (PAVN)

also fought tenaciously pushing back three tank-led attacks. The RF even resorted to flooding the nearby fields to slow down the PAVN tanks. The stiff RF opposition shocked the 9th Division troops that were forced to pull back. But they launched a stronger wave of attacks next day led by tanks and 85mm guns brought forward to provide direct-fire support. By the end of the morning most of the town was occupied. However, a group of South Vietnamese militiamen, supported by some M113s, continued to resist in the area of the triangle fort. It was only on 13 March that the last position was taken, the North Vietnamese having lost 10 T-54s during the battle.

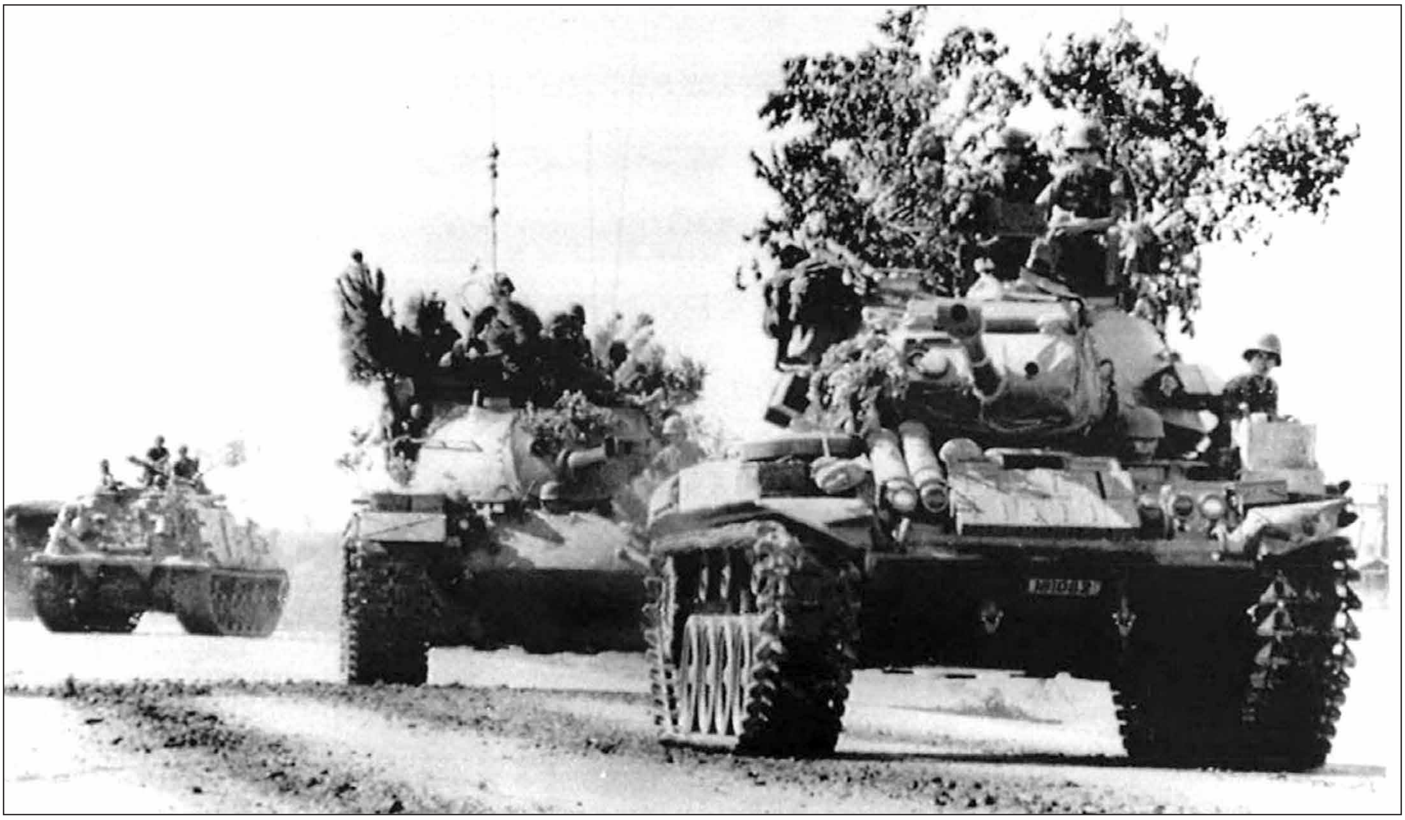
On the southern pincer, the 303rd Division attacked Ben Cau, reinforced by the 3rd Regiment of the 5th Division, an anti-aircraft artillery battalion, PT-76 tanks and seven captured M113s. The local RF units also offered stiff resistance, destroying two PT-76s, effectively supported by artillery and close air support strikes. From 8 to 14 March, the VNAF flew 320 attack sorties, losing three aircraft but claiming 17 more tanks destroyed. The North Vietnamese also brought forward 85mm guns for direct-fire support. It took four days for the Communists to overcome the defenders of Ben Cau.

After analysing these initial attacks, Lieutenant General Toan concluded that the Communists intended either to take Tay Ninh City or to cut it off by connecting the two pincers at the important road junction of Go Dau Ha and capturing it. Toan decided prudently to defend Tay Ninh City rather than trying to reconquer the lost positions. He deployed the 46th, 49th, and 50th Regiments of the 25th Division around the town. He also assigned the elite 81st Airborne Ranger Group to protect the city proper. On 11 March, Toan directed the ARVN 3rd Armoured Brigade of Brigadier General Tran Quang Khoi, and the 33rd Ranger Group to shift immediately to Go Dau Ha to hold that important road junction. In fact, Khoi had reorganised his brigade into the III Corps Assault Force, with three task forces: TF-315, TF-318 and TF-322. Each of them had a Ranger battalion from the 33rd Ranger Group, an artillery battery of 105mm howitzers mounted on M548 tracked tractors, a cavalry squadron on M113s and M41s, as well as a troop of M48 Pattons from the 23rd Tank Squadron. Acting as a fire brigade, Khoi had created a unique outfit in the ARVN in terms of mobility and firepower, with 150 M113s, 55 M41s, and 40 M48s. The unit could operate independently or attached to a division for a particular operation, and could be bolstered by additional armour, artillery, or infantry. Khoi would counterattack, with the ultimate objective of retaking Tri Tam. Toan also detached the 48th Regiment from the 18th Division and lifted it by helicopter to Go Dau Ha despite stiff anti-aircraft fires. All these reinforcements certainly secured for the moment Tay Ninh City but had weakened the ARVN III Corps' north-eastern sector.

While Toan believed the pincers north and south of Tay Ninh City would attempt to link up at Go Dau Ha, Tra's plan called for the bulk of the 303rd Division pincer to turn in the opposite direction, into Hau Nghia Province. The division left one regiment to take Go Dau Ha while the rest marched away from the town. Thanks to effective VNAF support, the tankers of Brigadier General Khoi succeeded in holding the city, although enemy elements came within 2km of it. Toan then directed the 48th Regiment to recapture Route 1 from Go Dau Ha to Cambodia, threatening the rear of the PAVN 303rd Division. Seeing ARVN forces pushing along Route 1, Tra ordered PAVN 9th Division to attack on Khoi's other flank near Tri Tam to force Toan to pull the 49th Regiment back to assist the 3rd Armoured Brigade against this sudden manoeuvre. On 23 March, one regiment of the 9th Division drove the newly reconstituted 2nd Battalion, 7th Regiment, ARVN 5th Division – the unit that had been decimated at Phuoc Long – from the town of Truong Mit near Local Route 22.

Khoi immediately reacted by sending TF-315 and TF-318 to retake the town. The PAVN 9th Division was pressing south when it ran into the South Vietnamese armoured column and a major battle erupted on 24 March. After fierce fighting, Khoi's tanks and Rangers blasted through the Communist forces and recaptured Truong Mit two days later. The PAVN 211st and 271st Regiments suffered heavy casualties despite being supported by 85mm and 122mm guns of the 42nd Artillery Regiment and a battalion of 37mm AA guns. The South Vietnamese also lost over 500 men killed, wounded, and missing. Still, the 9th Division's gambit paid off. Faced with the larger threat at Truong Mit, Khoi pulled the 48th Regiment advancing on Route 1 back to hold Go Dau Ha. Overall, the North Vietnamese had forced Toan to shift forces from one threatened sector to another, with the armour of Khoi as firemen, bouncing

The commander of the ARVN III Corps was Lieutenant General Nguyen Van Toan, probably the best South Vietnamese armoured operations specialist. He skilfully used his armoured task forces, quickly displacing them from one threatened sector to another. (US Navy)



Central to Lieutenant General Nguyen Van Toan's strategy in the defence of the III Corps around Saigon was the III Corps Assault Force, with three mechanised task forces made up of tanks, APCs, artillery, and Ranger troops. Amour of TF-315, including M41 and M48 tanks, as well as an M88 tank recovery vehicle, moves along Route 22 to defend Go Dau Ha. (ARVN)

An M48 Patton of TF-318 moving along Route 22 to defend the southern sector of Tay Ninh. (ARVN)

An M113 of TF-315 during the fighting around Tri Tam in March 1975. (ARVN)

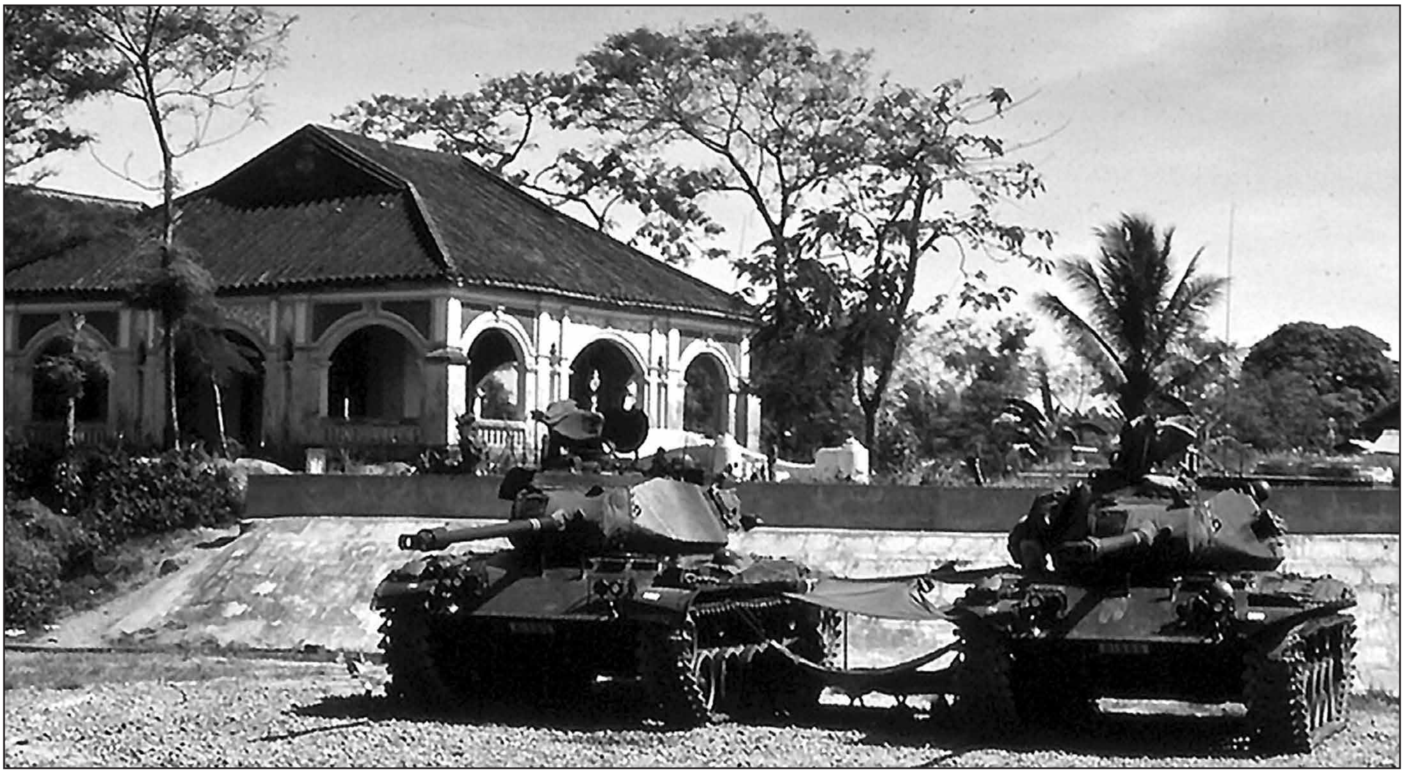
back and forth between the two flanks within Tay Ninh Province, putting out one blaze after another. It was a brilliant orchestration of men and equipment, one that required excellent staff work and logistical planning.

Despite all his prowess, Toan knew that he could not indefinitely hold against superior enemy forces. During the National Security Council meeting of 13 March, President Thieu had given Toan permission to redeploy his Ranger units. The ARVN III Corps controlled three Ranger Groups: the 31st, 32nd, and 33rd. This last unit was working with the 3rd Armoured Brigade. The battle-tested 31st Group was the former 3rd Ranger Group, which had gallantly withstood the hell of the An Loc siege of 1972. It currently defended the town of Chon Thanh on Route 13, but it was surrounded by Communist troops and could only be resupplied by air. The nearest ARVN outpost was 16km south of Chon Thanh. The 32nd, stationed at An Loc, 19km north of Chon Thanh on Route 13, was even more isolated. An Loc was Binh Long Province's capital and held the ARVN III Corps Ranger Command. The city also had a great psychological importance: the heroic defence of An Loc in 1972 had been the most glorious South Vietnamese feat of arms of the war. However, neither An Loc nor Chon Thanh was of any further military value. Each Ranger Group had three battalions, and these veteran units were needed to bolster the hard-pressed ARVN defences closer to Saigon. President Thieu came to the same conclusion and decided to abandon these two towns as the situation required it.

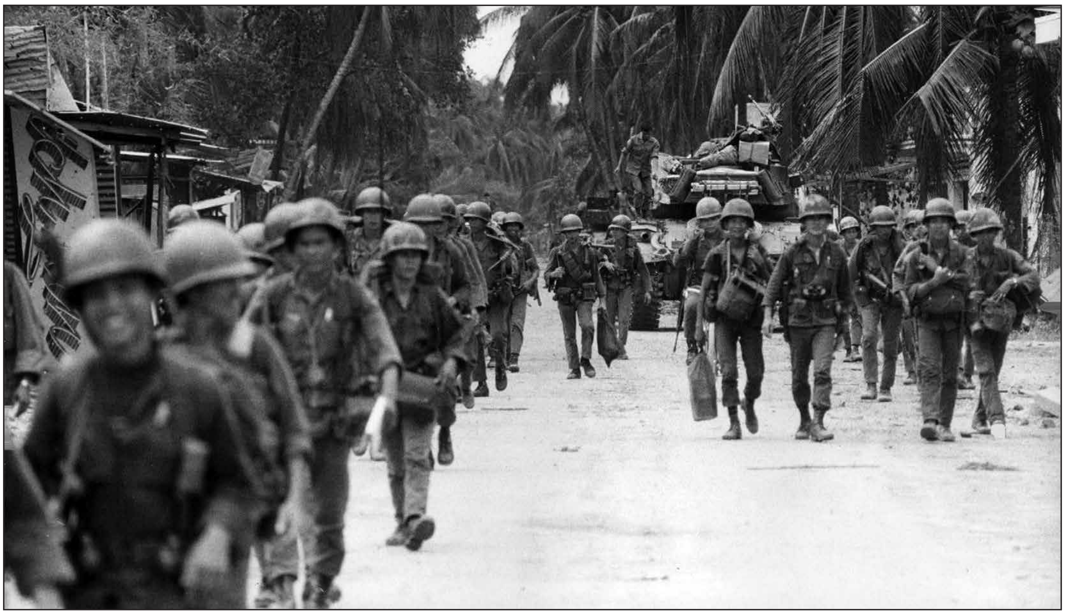
Long anticipating another Communist assault on An Loc, III Corps' Ranger commander, Colonel Nguyen Thanh Chuan, had ordered his units to prepare for a long siege. They had stockpiled a 90-day supply of fuel, food, and ammunition. Colonel Chuan could not imagine abandoning a town that thousands of South Vietnamese soldiers had died to protect. He was stunned when he received order to evacuate An Loc but nevertheless complied. Chuan had five days to prepare to withdraw back to Chon Thanh. He planned a phased evacuation of the city. First, he would lift out his artillery, evacuate the civilians, and burn all supplies and equipment. Once this was accomplished, helicopters would carry out the III Corps Ranger Command, the province headquarters, and one battalion from the 32nd Group. The other two battalions and the regional forces would then march overland and link up with the 31st Ranger Battalion from Chon Thanh, which would be sent to meet them halfway.

Chuan executed the first two parts of his plan without incident. The CH-47As flew out twelve 105mm howitzers but five other pieces of 155mm had to be abandoned, too heavy to be lifted out. Now, his remaining battalions had to walk through a jungle completely controlled by the enemy. The Rangers departed at nightfall. Despite a few small clashes, the Rangers moved swiftly and arrived unscathed in Chon Thanh on 20 March. One of the reasons for their success was that Tra had stripped his regular troops from An Loc to use in Tay Ninh, leaving only local guerrillas to guard Route 13.

Tra reacted with fury and ordered the PAVN 9th Division to eliminate Chon Thanh immediately. Anticipating such a move, Chuan quickly developed a new defensive system based on his one RF and six Ranger battalions, plus 11 M41 tanks and artillery.



Two M41 tanks of the 10th ACS, the constituent cavalry squadron of the ARVN 25th Division, in the area of Tay Ninh. (ARVN)

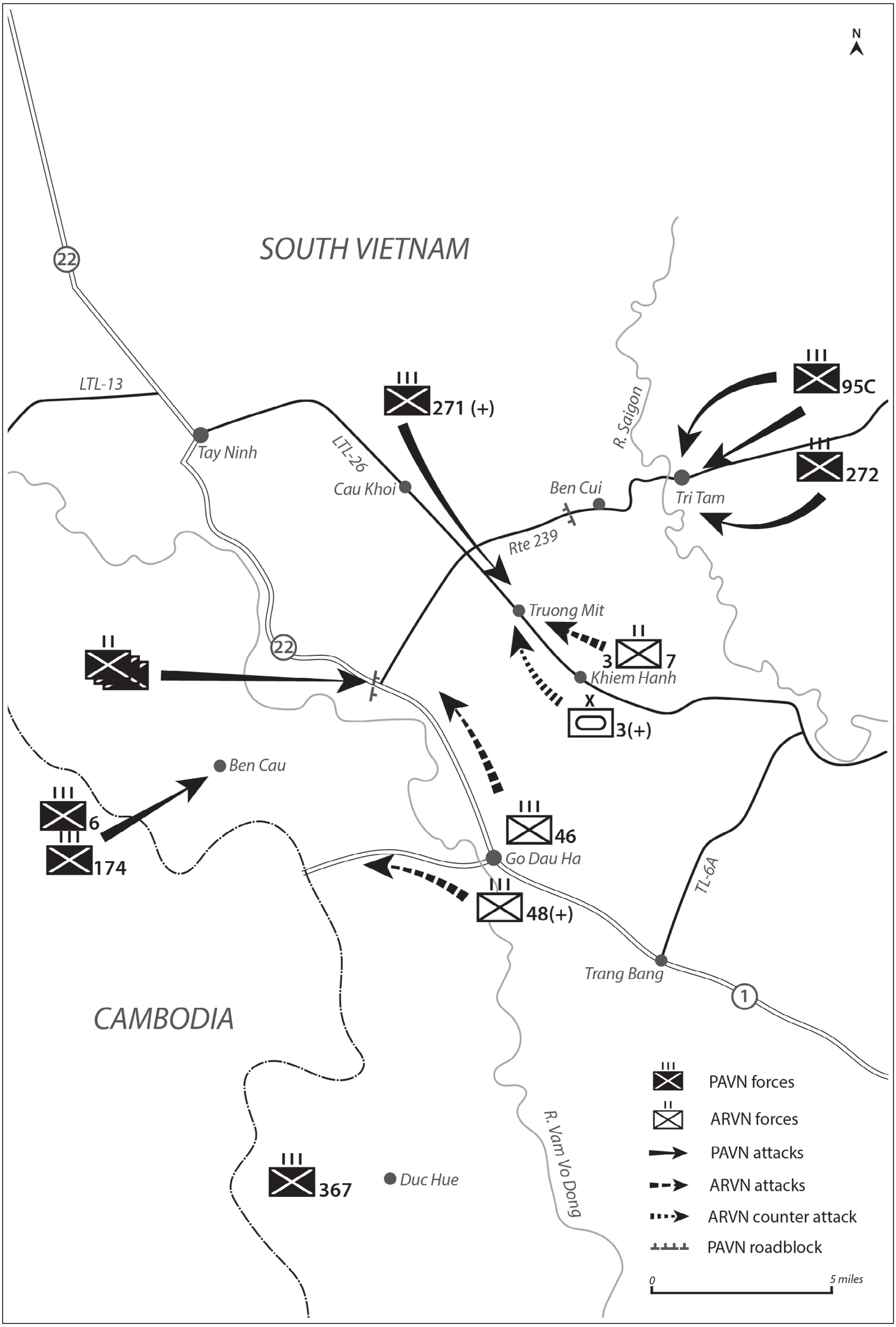


Troops of the ARVN 49th Regiment, 25th Division, operating in the area of Truong Mit. (ARVN)

The Rangers had long ago reinforced the defences of the base, surrounded by a ditch, and behind the ditch a wall of sandbags covered with earth. With two Ranger groups, Chuan was confident that he could sustain almost any enemy attack. However, as soon as he had completed his plans, Toan told him to release the 32nd Ranger Group so it could be sent to Tay Ninh. Flabbergasted, Chuan begged Toan to allow him to retain at least one battalion, to which Toan agreed. The 32nd Group was soon lifted out, leaving one battalion behind.

The PAVN 9th Division sent most of two regiments, supported by local forces and a battalion of tanks, to attack Chon Thanh. There was no time for reconnaissance or probing attacks. Tra wanted immediate results. At 9:30 a.m. on 24 March, PAVN launched a frontal assault. After the artillery barrage lifted, the T-54s surged forwards. Holding their fire until the enemy armour was close, the Rangers cut loose with a ferocious barrage of anti-tank rockets and recoilless-rifle fire. The following North Vietnamese waves were pounded by artillery and VNAF. By the evening, after two successive assaults, the 9th Division pulled back, with 14 destroyed T-54s lying in front of the ARVN positions.

On 27 March, the PAVN 9th Division attacked again but was pushed back, with 11 more T-54s destroyed. Before planning a new attack, the 9th Division was reinforced by the 273rd Regiment, 341st Division, which had been holding blocking positions on Route 13 south of Chon Thanh. A new assault was launched on 31 March, supported by tanks and heavy artillery. But the Rangers, fighting with fierce determination, had stopped cold an entire reinforced PAVN division. However, the ammunition was now running out for the defenders and the flack was now so heavy that helicopters were no longer able to land. Realising his predicament, Chuan requested permission to withdraw to Lai Khe. Toan approved the request, and the breakout was carried out at 10:00 p.m. The VNAF launched 52 strike sorties as a diversion. The Rangers punched through enemy lines, taking artillery and M41 tanks with them. By dawn, with moderate losses, they reached Bau Bang and Lai Khe. The pursuing North Vietnamese units, spearheaded by tanks and a company of ZSU-57-2s, faced fierce resistance at Lai Khe. The ARVN M41s and air strikes inflicted heavy losses and an additional 10 tanks were destroyed.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ARVN forces
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ARVN attacks
ARVN counter attack
PAVN roadblock
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5 miles

Map 1: Tay Ninh – Tri Tam. (Map by George Anderson)

On 19 March 1975, ARVN decided to evacuate An Loc, besieged during the Easter Offensive of 1972. Taking the enemy by surprise, the garrison pulled out successfully towards Chon Thanh. Most of the artillery of the place was successfully lifted out by VNAF CH-47As. (ARVN)

Despite being carried out at short distances, the successful evacuation of An Loc and Chon Thanh proved that the expected collapse of ARVN morale did not happen in the III Corps area. The South Vietnamese forces there would fight when whole areas and their population were not abandoned. Nevertheless, the North Vietnamese had now captured all of Binh Long Province and had compressed ARVN defensive lines even closer to Saigon.

Meanwhile, it was in the ARVN III Corps' north-eastern sector that General Tran Van Tra would now launch the second, perhaps the more important phase of the PAVN 4th Corps' offensive. The purpose was to erode the South Vietnamese control in Long Khanh Province, capture Route 20, and pin down the ARVN 18th Division to prevent its deployment elsewhere in III Corps. His overall goal was to create a "liberated barrier" along the border of the ARVN II and III Corps. The PAVN 7th Division, made up of the 141st, 165th, and 209th Regiments, was ordered to take Dinh Quan on Route 20, some 22km northwest of Xuan Loc. Once it was taken, the 7th Division would simultaneously attack in opposite directions along Route 20: to the southwest to seize the critical bridge over the nearby La Nga River, and to the northeast to capture Dalat. When the 7th Division attacked Route 20, the 6th Division would capture Route 2, a road leading south from Xuan Loc to Route 15, the road to the port of Vung Tau. It would then turn north and attack eastward from Xuan Loc along Route 1 into Binh Tuy Province. MR-6's 812th Regiment would capture Hoai Duc district and finish clearing north-eastern Long Khanh Province and link up with the 6th Division, thereby isolating the coastal provinces from eastern ARVN III Corps.

On 6 March, the PAVN 7th Division departed Phuoc Long for the long march to Route 20. The large Dong Nai River, however, lay between it and the road. All movement was made by night, and it took three nights for the division to cross the river on a pontoon bridge. VNAF air reconnaissance soon detected the North Vietnamese truck traffic. Despite all the camouflage measures taken by the North Vietnamese, Toan suspected that the enemy would strike his north-eastern sector. On 16 March, he ordered Brigadier General Le Minh Dao of the ARVN 18th Division to send two battalions of the 43rd Regiment to defend Dinh Quan. The 2nd Battalion arrived in Dinh Quan that day and was deployed northwest of the town. The 1st Battalion was deployed around the La Nga Bridge. Dao left the 3rd Battalion near Hoai Duc to assist the RF in that area against the expected attack by the PAVN 812th Regiment. Dao's 52nd Regiment held Xuan Loc and the critical junction of Routes 1 and 20 northeast of Saigon at Dau Giay. With his 48th Regiment detached to defend Tay Ninh, the CO of the 18th Division was now out of troops. The territorial forces

The ARVN evacuation of Chon Thanh at the end of March 1975 was covered by artillery positioned at Go Dau Ha. An M107 175mm SP gun opens fire against an enemy concentration of forces northwest of Saigon. (ARVN)

An M41 of the 5th ACS, constituent cavalry unit of the ARVN 18th Division, advances cautiously on Route 20 during the preliminary phase of the Xuan Loc battle against the PAVN 7th Division. (ARVN)

stationed on Route 2 south of Xuan Loc and east along Route 1, the targets of the 6th Division and the 812th Regiment, were on their own.

Despite that surprise was now lost, the PAVN 7th Division attacked on the morning of 17 March supported by the 21st Tank Battalion. The 141st Regiment struck Dinh Quan and immediately encountered fierce resistance from the ARVN 2nd Battalion, 43rd Regiment, entrenched at Ma Da Gui. It took several attempts by 12 T-54s of the 2nd Company to overcome the position. It was only the next day that the Communists took Dinh Quan, the South Vietnamese pulling back towards the La Nga Bridge, reinforcing the ARVN 1st Battalion there. On the morning of 20 March, it was now the turn of the PAVN 209th Regiment, 7th Division, to try to take the bridge, charging the positions of the 2nd Battalion several times but being driven off as the defenders used two 105mm howitzers loaded with anti-personnel rounds fired straight into the massed Communist attackers. VNAF also offered air support but an F-5E mistakenly hit the battalion's position. In fighting two PAVN regiments for four days, the 2nd Battalion had suffered over 80 casualties. General Dao ordered the battalion to pull back to Xuan Loc and at dawn, the North Vietnamese captured the bridge. Its first mission fulfilled; the 7th Division was now replaced by the newly arrived 341st Division. Its 270th Regiment was to defend the newly captured territory, while the 266th Regiment would attack southwest along Route 20 to seize the next district town, Kiem Tan but its advance was stopped by a counterattack by the ARVN 52nd Regiment, 18th Division.

On Dao's second front, the PAVN 6th Division timed its own offensive to coincide with the 7th Division's attack. Between 15 and 18 March, the North Vietnamese swept north along Route 2. The 6th Division then struck east of Xuan Loc, overrunning Chua Chan Mountain, the important high ground due east of the city. By 28 March, the 6th Division controlled nearly a 60km section of Route 1 from Chua Chan into Binh Tuy Province. The last road artery from Saigon to central Vietnam had been cut, preventing ARVN from using the coastal portion of Route 1 to assist II Corps.

Meanwhile, the PAVN 812th Regiment opened fire on Dao's third front, attacking the town of Vo Dac, the Hoai Duc district headquarters. The local RF troops that had survived a 30-day siege, fought off repeated attacks for three days. Vo Dac was finally taken on 20 March after a massive preparatory artillery barrage. The 812th Regiment then turned on the last remaining ARVN element in the area, the 3rd Battalion of the 43rd Regiment which was defending some nearby high ground. After two days of fighting, Dao ordered his battalion to retreat back to Xuan Loc. Shortly thereafter the 812th Regiment linked up with the 6th Division. Although badly behind schedule, the 812th Regiment now turned to complete the second part of its mission: helping the 7th Division clear Route 20 and capture the provinces of Lam Dong and Tuyen Duc.

They advanced against only scattered resistance from RF outposts. The main target was the capital of the Tuyen Duc Province, Dalat. It was the last important town in the hands of the South Vietnamese in the Central Highlands with its National Military Academy. Its commander, Major General Lam Quang Tho, received orders to defend the town but now surrounded, he knew he had little chance with a few RF troops against a reinforced PAVN division. Since the Academy's cadets were desperately needed to recoup the terrible losses that the South Vietnamese armed forces had suffered, he was finally ordered to withdraw through Route 11 to the city of Phan Rang, the only road to the coast. He departed on the night of 31 March with the cadets and instructors. They reached Phan Rang with relative ease on the morning of 1 April and continued on to Binh Tuy Province until Route 1 was cut by the Communists. The cadets were then lifted by helicopters to Saigon. The 812th Regiment entered Dalat on 3 April without a shot being fired, the local militiamen had melted away.

2

THE MEKONG DELTA HOLDS FIRM

While Tra's plans were bearing fruit on the western, northern, and eastern side of Saigon, they were not going smoothly to the south, in the Mekong Delta. Instead of attacking throughout the vast area, the PAVN MR-8 focused its efforts in only three districts west of My Tho, the Delta's second-largest city. These already hotly contested districts also controlled a long section of Route 4. The capture of this territory would enable the Communists to not only directly threaten My Tho, but also would link the troops of MR-8 with the 303rd Division advancing south from Hau Nghia Province. Thanks to good intelligence, the ARVN IV Corps CO, Major General Nguyen Khoa Nam, launched a series of pre-emptive operations against the PAVN 8th Division that had infiltrated approximately 12km northeast of My Tho. The ARVN 7th Division kept the critical Route 4 open and repulsed a dozen Communist attacks. By the end of March, the North Vietnamese offensive in the Delta receded and had not seriously disrupted the ARVN formation or seized significant territory.

However, Tra persisted and decided to renew attacks against another portion of Route 4 as well as taking Can Tho, the capital of the lower Delta. He ordered to the PAVN 5th Division to move towards the Long An Province. After three days of trampling across canals, a regiment reached an assembly area near Tan An, the provincial capital. A second regiment was sent to attack Thu Thua, north of Tan An. A third was held in reserve near Tan An. This section of Route 4 was squeezed between the Vam Co Dong (Eastern Vam Co) and Vam Co Tay (Western Vam Co) rivers. A network of lateral canals cut across the land. If PAVN forces succeeded in capturing Tan An plus the bridges on Route 4 over the two Vam Co rivers, they would sever Saigon from the Delta. On 9 April, the PAVN 5th Division attacked Thu Thua and Tan An with two regiments, while another element set up a roadblock on Route 4 near the Long An – Dinh Tuong provincial border to block ARVN 7th Division reinforcements coming from the south. As dawn broke, the North Vietnamese troops surged forward and captured the local airfield, but the local RF at Tan An stood firm. Caught out in the flat Delta terrain, the exposed enemy troops were pummelled by artillery and the VNAF. The ARVN 7th Division quickly responded to the attack, sending its 12th Regiment and the M113s of the 6th ACS to clear out the roadblock and catch the PAVN 5th Division from behind. Over the course of four days, ARVN fought a series of battles, shattering one of the North Vietnamese regiments, with the South Vietnamese recovering over 500 enemy bodies in the rice fields.

The results were the same in Thu Thua where only local Popular Forces guarded this important town. An assault sapper unit that moved in was caught in the open by the Long An Province riverboat company that returned sooner than expected from its night patrol. The town was soon reinforced by two RF battalions while the gunboats were hiding in a nearby small canal. It was that moment that the third Communist regiment attacked. The six gunboats moved out and went back and forth along the front canal, firing their 20mm and .50-Cal guns despite numerous RPGs and mortars bracketing on them. Along with the VNAF, the gunboats stopped cold the enemy assault. The North Vietnamese pulled back and shelled the town with artillery.

Troops of the PAVN 4th Division infiltrating the Mekong Delta area to attack Can Tho in early April 1975. (PAVN)

Soldiers of the ARVN 21st Division patrolling around Can Tho after beating back the PAVN 4th Division offensive. (ARVN)

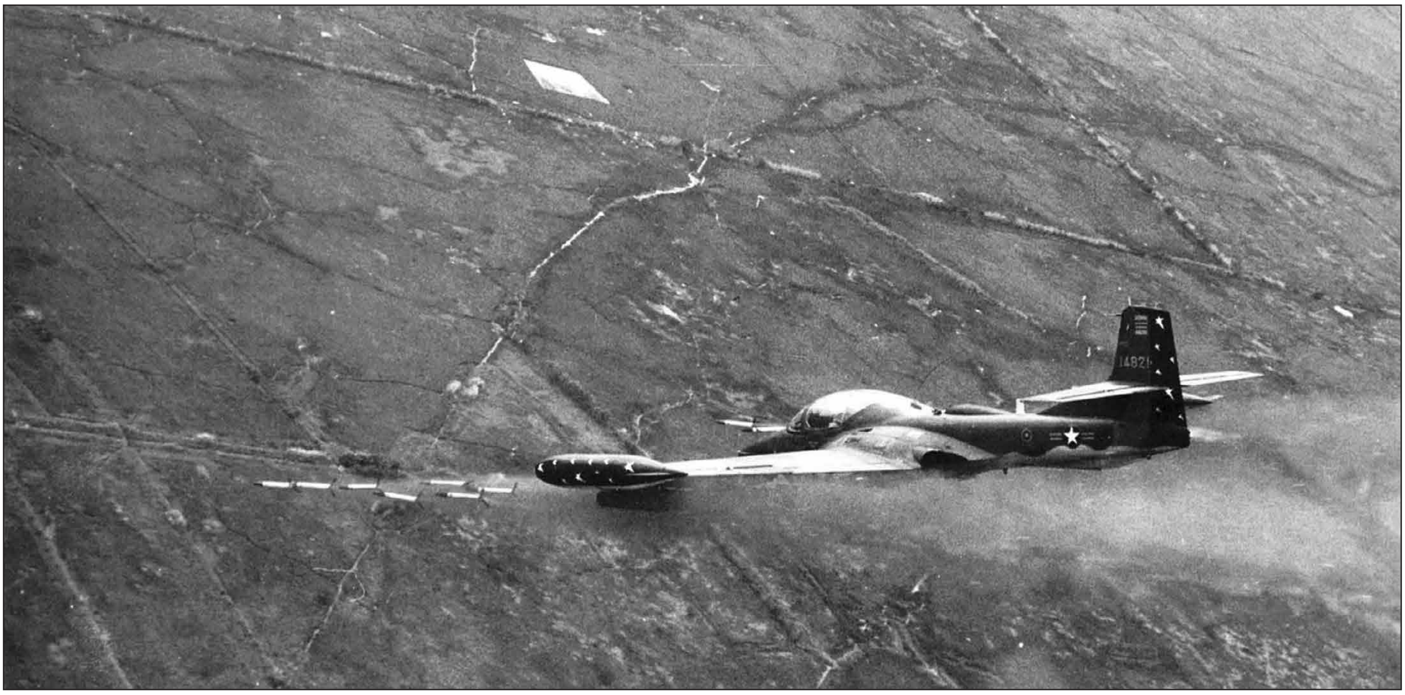
Despite being greatly diminished due to budgetary restrictions, forcing it to disband many of its units, the VNN still provided sterling services to help ARVN holding the Mekong Delta area. The *Nguyen Duc Bong*, a PCE patrol boat, is seen here during a support operation for the ARVN 21st Division. (VNN)

A VNN ASPB being prepared for another patrol. Note that this particular gunboat has been locally modified with the addition of eight additional M20 "Super Bazooka" 3.5-inch (89mm) rocket launchers to the turret housing the 20mm gun. (VNN)

The other main PAVN offensive was directed against Can Tho, to be carried out by the 4th Division, supported by the local Viet Cong units of MR-9. VNAF EC-47s intercepted enemy radio communications indicating the impeding offensive. Major General Nam reacted aggressively and ordered the ARVN 21st Division of Colonel Mach Van Truong, then conducting an operation along the edge of the U Minh Forest, to pull back to protect the city. In addition to the division's 31st, 32nd, and 33rd Regiments, as well as its constituent 9th ACS mounted on M113s, Nam reinforced the unit with two additional regiments; the 11th Regiment, 7th Division, and the 63rd Regiment, a unit that had been created out of an An Giang Province RF Group. All nearby Corps and territorial artillery were organised into a fire-support network to directly assist the 21st Division.

To block the enemy attack, Truong positioned his 32nd Regiment and the attached 11th and 63rd Regiments, together with RF territorial forces, in defensive fortifications along the highway into Can Tho, which the Communists called the Arc Road. The 9th ACS and the 33rd Regiment were combined into Task Force 933, stationed outside his defensive perimeter as a mobile force that could attack the enemy's rear. He kept the 31st Regiment as a central reserve. On the night of 8 April, the PAVN 4th Division reached the Arc Road after infiltrating from the U Minh Forest but could only bring along its mortars as it had to cross numerous rivers and canals. When the Communists attacked at dawn, the pre-arranged artillery barrages pinned them in place, then VNAF air strikes took over and TF-933 moved in to seal off the retreat route. The North Vietnamese dug in and fought the entire day under continuous pounding. Unable to punch through, they pulled back the next day, after suffering over 400 killed or wounded.

In response to the PAVN 4th and 5th Divisions' setbacks, MR-8 forces launched attacks to draw ARVN units away from Route 4. On 13 April, two PAVN 8th Division regiments and two Long An local-force battalions attacked Tan Tru, an important district town where the Vam Co Tay and Vam Co Dong Rivers converge. For four days, the local PF fought off the enemy, backed by numerous VNAF air strikes. To assist the PF, General Toan of III Corps ordered the recently arrived elements of the ARVN 22nd Division to help defend



An A-37B of the 520th Fighter Squadron, 74th Wing, of the Binh Thuy (Can Tho) AB firing rockets against a Communist position. (USAF)

Tan Tru. Although the reconstituted 22nd Division was a shadow of its former self, one of its regiments quickly pushed the PAVN forces back in a rare Corps combined operation. The communication lines of the Communists were now harassed by VNN's TF-99. Sailing up the Vam Co Tay River, its PBRs and Monitors intercepted several groups of PAVN troops which tried to cross it. A group of porters was burned to death by monitors equipped with "Zippo" flamethrowers. After failing to seize any territory, the PAVN 8th Division turned north reaching an assembly area near Saigon.

Instead of concentrating his forces to cut Route 4, Tra mistakenly engaged them on a piecemeal fashion in the Delta, allowing the ARVN to successfully defeat each committed division. The South Vietnamese there still had good morale and performed well. Tra consequently decided to halt operations in IV Corps until the main Saigon offensive. He had, however, accomplished the important goal of tying down the three ARVN divisions of the IV Corps in the Delta. Any hope of moving units to support the III Corps, as had been done with the ARVN 21st Division during the 1972 offensive, was now out of the question.

If the South Vietnamese prevailed in the Delta, it was in great part due for their superior mobility and firepower. However, the last South Vietnamese edge of superiority that they still had, their air force, was fast declining. Between 10 March 1975, when the battle of Ban Me Thuot began, until 10 April 1975, by which time all air bases in the northern half of South Vietnam had been evacuated, the VNAF had flown 3,468 close air support sorties, 1,349 interdiction sorties, and 123 reconnaissance sorties. Despite the gravity of the situation, it appeared that only around 500 additional sorties had been generated, compared to the scheduled working plan. It was true that the rapid collapse of the ARVN and the loss of air bases gravely disrupted any concerted efforts to increase the rate of sorties. During the same period, the transport squadrons also flew 1,669 sorties, carrying 54,000 passengers and 4,500 tons of cargo. The C-130A fleet also transferred North Vietnamese prisoners to Phu Quoc Island in the Gulf of Siam, while 5,200 tons of supplies had been dropped to besieged garrisons.

In this period of time, the VNAF lost 39 fixed fixed-wing aircraft shot down and had to abandon no fewer than 387 others. A census of 4 April indicated that the VNAF had now shrunk to a total of 976 operational aircraft. In the face of such dire circumstances, it was decided to reactivate as many of the aircraft that had been placed in storage as possible. At Tan Son Nhut AB the 429th and 431st Transport Squadrons were resurrected on C-7A Caribous. That came in addition to the revived 514th and 518th Fighter Squadrons at Bien Hoa AB on Skyraiders. Meanwhile, the fleet of Hercules was more and more committed to bombing missions, with eight to 12 aircraft available each day for the task. From 1 to 19 April, the C-130As flew some 153 BOBS bombing sorties (see Volume 3 for a detailed description of this method). Among the targets attacked were an enemy Corps headquarters, suspected concentrations of troops, convoys and an SA-2 site that was being set up. There were also some strikes against the lost airbases of Phuoc Long, Nha Trang, and Pleiku to crater the runways in order to deny their use by enemy aircraft. The VNAF's C-130As also dropped nine BLU-82 "Daisy Cutter" 15,000lb (6,800kg) bombs with four available qualified crews to drop them.

3

THE LAST COASTAL ENCLAVE

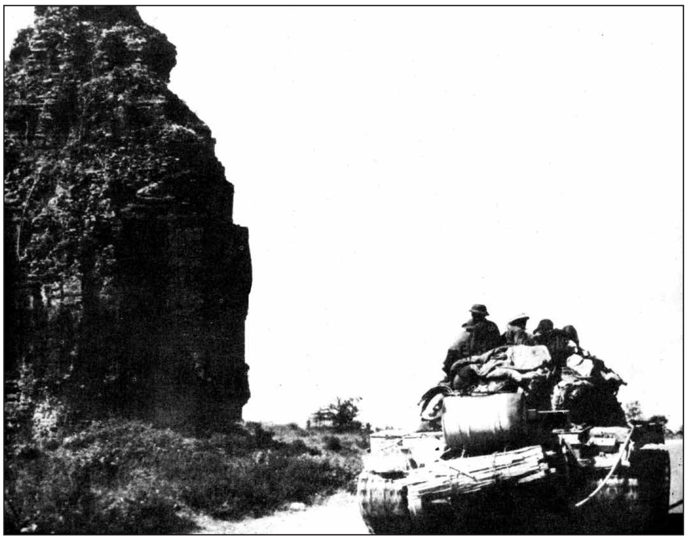
Despite encountering stiff resistance, Tra achieved the aims of the more global scheme assigned to the B2 Front by Giap. He had secured the necessary springboards for a direct attack against Saigon. The unexpected collapse of the South Vietnamese in the northern provinces now presented to him an opportunity that he was determined to not miss. With the three aforementioned SACs moving down south, Giap, supported by Secretary General Le Duan, in fact ordered General Tran Van Tra to prepare to attack Saigon as soon as possible. Hanoi's leadership also sensed that there was an opportunity to grab, that the enemy morale there was also collapsing as in the Central Highlands and Da Nang. It was felt that an immediate attack with the available forces would suffice to crumble the remaining ARVN forces, allowing a quick occupation of the enemy capital without much fighting. It was a mistaken analysis and the fighting that ensued would be some of the heaviest of the entire conflict.

Tra took for granted the latest instructions after the Politburo meeting of 31 March 1975 that he could now try his chance by launching a direct attack against Saigon. Despite the recent fighting proving the contrary, his instinct told him that the ARVN III Corps had been plunged into great turmoil, on the verge of wholesale collapse. He would not wait the arrival of any reinforcements; he would conquer Saigon by himself. But, more cautious, the PAVN commander in chief, Senior General Van Tieng Dung, reined-in his enthusiasm: Saigon would eventually be attacked, but he again cautioned him to wait for the arrival of the whole PAVN battle corps. Dung told him that it would be preferable to wait and to mass overwhelming forces before attacking Saigon and PAVN should secure its rear lines of communications first by pacifying the newly conquered areas. There were also a huge number of prisoners to deal with, as a result troops from the Public Security Ministry were required to take them on charge. There was also the daunting task of administering the newly liberated areas, to return life to normalcy as much as possible.

The PAVN B2 Front finally succeeded in cutting all land links beyond Xuan Loc northward, thus isolating Phan Rang, the last ARVN III Corps forward position along the coastal Route 1. The situation there had barely been stabilised by early April with the deployment of the 2nd Airborne Brigade. Lieutenant General Nguyen Vinh Nghi in charge of the defence of the sector immediately sent the Paratroopers into a helicopter assault, on 9 April, to retake the Du Long Pass, between Cam Ranh and Phan Rang, held by Communist guerrillas. The pass was cleared out and a North Vietnamese truck convoy captured. The positions west and south of Phan Rang were also secured but a new threat appeared with the advance of the PAVN 812th Regiment down Route 11 from Dalat. But the 812th Regiment, after reaching the coast, moved down south along Route 1, attacking Phan Thiet, less-well defended by only three RF battalions, but that put up a determined defence at Thien Giao, north of Phan Thiet, halting the North Vietnamese advance. However, another PAVN roadblock was now installed south of Phan Rang that was more isolated than ever, only resupplied by ships and from the air. The local airbase was now harassed by rocket fire, forcing the VNAF to rotate part of their units based there to Bien Hoa AB, and the ground crews were forced to wear flak jackets and dig trenches near the parking areas. Pilots flew up to four missions per day, attacking Cam Ranh and Route 1. They often also helped the depleted teams of armourers to load bombs and rockets on their own aircraft and often got only one meal a day.

The PAVN 325th Division attacked the ARVN northern perimeter of Phan Rang with the help of T-54 tanks. (PAVN)

With the departure of the PAVN 10th Division, Nghi was optimistic enough to even envisage the next attack to reoccupy Cam Ranh, temporarily lightly defended. Unfortunately for him, he had no inkling that the massive enemy "coastal column" was pouring down Route 1 towards his forces. In fact, Cam Ranh was



A T-54 of the 4th Tank Battalion, 203rd Armoured Brigade, rolling down Route 1 during the second PAVN assault against Phan Rang on 16 April 1975. (PAVN)

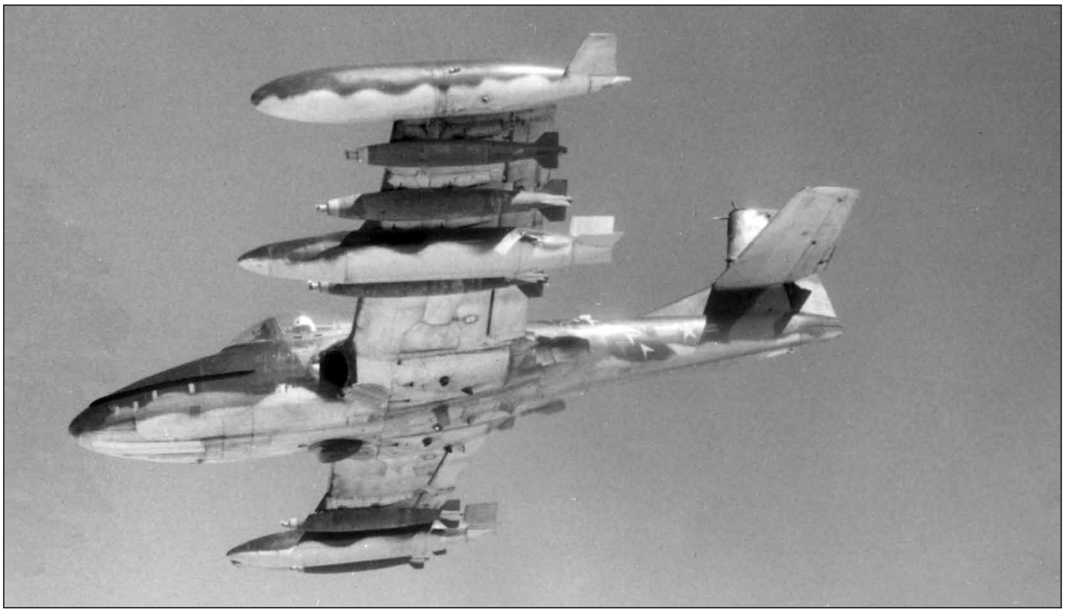
One of the six ARVN M48s of the reconstituted 8th ACS that was destroyed by T-54s while defending Phan Rang's northern approach at Go Den. (PAVN)

soon secured by the 968th Division, followed by the 3rd Division of the B3 Front. On 12 April, Le Trong Tan and the coastal column also reached Cam Ranh. He immediately developed plans to attack Phan Rang. He ordered the 3rd Division to attack along Route 1 and capture the Du Long Pass and then the town. A secondary but still important attack would be made by the B3 Front's 25th Regiment to capture the local airbase.

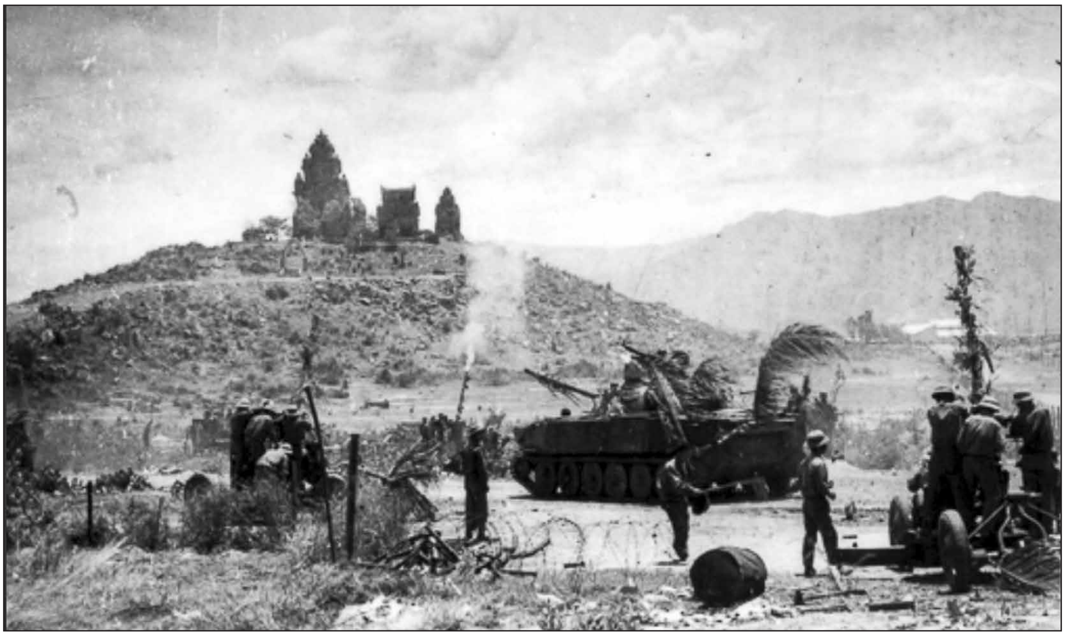
The 3rd Division decided to send two spearheads along Route 1. One battalion would strike Du Long with 20 T-54 tanks in support, while another would swing behind the pass and attack Ba Rau, the village halfway between Du Long and Phan Rang. Another regiment would punch towards the sea and follow the coast to cut off escape in that direction, supported by a company of Type 63 tanks and K-63 APCs. The 25th Regiment with 85mm guns and a battery of 37mm AA guns would attack the airbase. Another regiment would be held in reserve. The attack would begin at dawn on 14 April.

Unaware of the gathering enemy, on 12 April, Lieutenant General Nguyen Van Toan informed Nghi that the 2nd Airborne Brigade would be withdrawn back to Saigon the next day. It would be replaced by the 31st Ranger Group, which had recently fought at Chon Thanh, and the depleted 2nd Division, deployed further south of Route 1 at Ham Tam. It had the reconstituted 4th and 5th Regiments, that last unit made up of RF, stragglers, and deserters. The division not only lacked in men but also equipment, artillery,

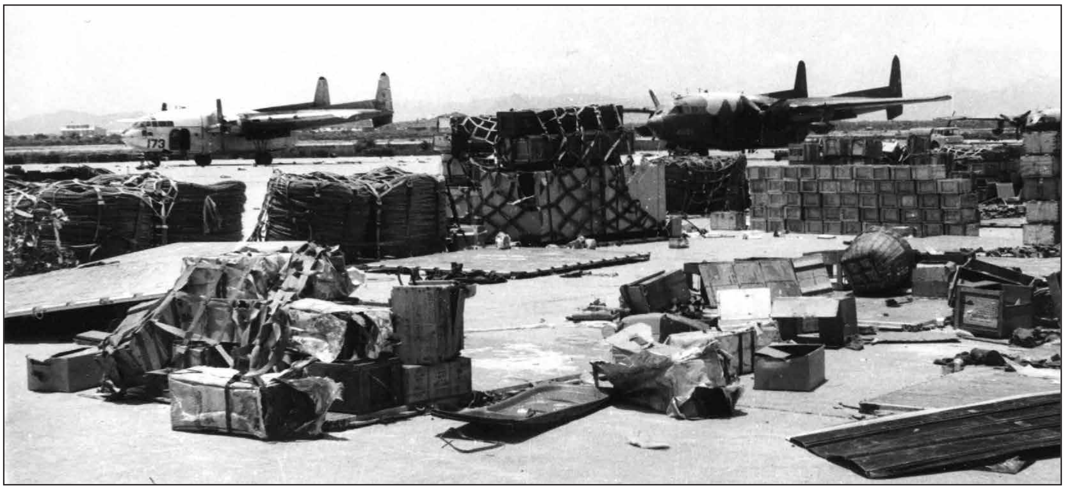
A K-63 of the 5th Armoured Battalion, 203rd Armoured Brigade, entering Phan Rang after overpowering the last ARVN resistance. (PAVN)



The North Vietnamese forces that attacked Phan Rang suffered heavy losses to the VNAF A-37Bs of the locally based 82nd Wing. (USAF)



A Type 63 tank of the 5th Armoured Battalion, 203rd Armoured Brigade, attacking towards the main access gate of Phan Rang AB under the protection of 37mm anti-aircraft guns. The South Vietnamese pilots based there flew missions until the very last moment. (PAVN)

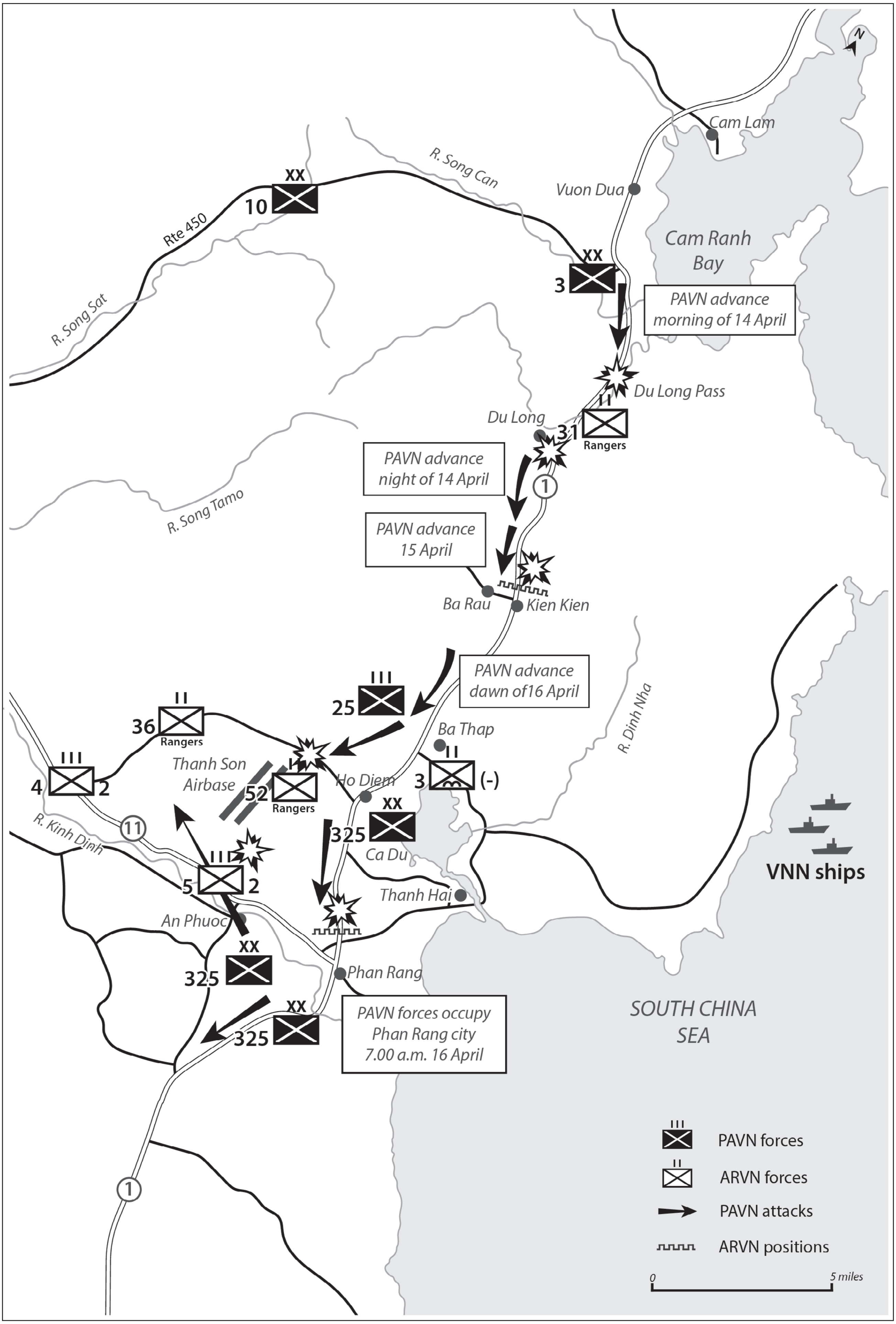


At Phan Rang AB the North Vietnamese captured two AC-119Ks of the 821st Attack Squadron, and two C-119Gs of the 720th Transport Squadron caught on the ground by the sudden advance of the Communist armour. (PAVN)

radios, and ammunition. It was supported by a reconstituted 8th ACS with some M48s and M113s. By the evening of 13 April, the Ranger Group transfer by air was completed. The aircraft also flew the 7th Airborne Battalion back to Bien Hoa that same night. The deployment of the 2nd Division was completed on 14 April. The 4th Regiment would guard Route 11, west of the airbase, while the 5th Regiment would also remain near the airbase.

The Rangers of Colonel Nguyen Van Biet for their part would replace the paratroopers in their current positions, allowing the remaining 3rd and 11th Airborne Battalions to pull back towards the airbase to be evacuated by air the next day. The 31st Ranger Battalion settled in the Du Long Pass, while the 36th Ranger Battalion was placed west of the airbase. The 52nd Ranger Battalion was retained close to the entrance of the airfield to serve as a reserve. While the 3rd Airborne Battalion was already regrouped inside the airbase, only one company of the 11th Airborne Battalion had reached the place. The other three companies took up defensive positions on hilltops along Route 1 at Ba Rau, just north of Phan Rang.

At dawn on 14 April, the North Vietnamese attacked but the Rangers at the Du Long Pass held, thanks to air support, but they were outflanked by evening and were forced to fall back. Meanwhile, the PAVN 25th Regiment passed through the ARVN outposts under the cover of an intense artillery barrage and went directly for the airbase. A battalion reached the outskirts of the parking area but was pinned down there by VNAF helicopter gunships. The 11th Airborne Battalion that was awaiting retrieval counterattacked with the help of M113s. The A-37Bs swooped down to drop bombs and napalm on the enemy who were


Cam Lam
R. Song Can
XX
10
Vuon Dua
Rte 450
Cam Ranh Bay
XX
3
PAVN advance morning of 14 April
R. Song Sat
Du Long Pass
II
Du Long
31
Rangers
PAVN advance night of 14 April
1
R. Song Tamo
PAVN advance 15 April
Ba Rau
Kien Kien
PAVN advance dawn of16 April
III
25
II
36
Rangers
Ba Thap
R. Dinh Nha
III
4
2
Thanh Son Airbase
52
Rangers
Ho Diem
II
3
(-)
R. Kinh Dinh
11
XX
325
Ca Du
III
5
2
Thanh Hai
VNN ships
An Phuoc
XX
325
Phan Rang
XX
325
PAVN forces occupy Phan Rang city 7.00 a.m. 16 April
SOUTH CHINA SEA
1
PAVN forces
ARVN forces
PAVN attacks
ARVN positions
0
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Map 2: Phan Rang. (Map by George Anderson)

After capturing Phan Rang, the PAVN 2nd SAC "coastal column" continued to press on south. It was delayed by several destroyed bridges and minefields. Paths were cleared out of the minefields with specially developed vehicles that generated a magnetic field to detonate the mines. Several types of armour had been adapted for that purpose with the help of North Korean technicians, like this specially modified BTR-50 APC. (PAVN)

forced to withdraw. As night fell on 14 April, the ARVN forces had managed to hold off the 3rd Division's attacks.

The next morning, PAVN artillery resumed its heavy shelling, this time concentrating its fire on Ba Rau and Kien Kien, held by elements of the 3rd Airborne Battalion. The paratroopers held out for several hours but were also forced to pull back. Although the North Vietnamese were slowly gaining ground, they were stopped at Kien Kien when the VNAF destroyed the bridge there. At this rate of advance, it would take the Communists a week to reach Phan Rang. Such a delay threatened the coastal column's ability to reach Xuan Loc to participate in the attack. New measures were called for, and Major General Nguyen Huu An, CO of the 2nd SAC devised a new plan.

A "deep-penetration" group, made up of the 4th Tank Battalion, 203rd Armoured Brigade, and a reinforced infantry battalion mounted in trucks from the 101st Regiment, 325th Division, and a battery of 37mm AA guns. Next would be a truck convoy carrying the remaining two battalions of the 101st Regiment, along with ZIS-3 76.2mm and D-44 85mm guns to provide direct-fire support. An anti-aircraft artillery battalion at the column's rear would protect against the A-37Bs.

If the first spearhead failed, An would commit a second "penetration group" comprising the 18th Regiment, 325th Division, and the 5th Armoured Battalion on Type 63s and K-63s, reinforced with a company of BTR-50s. To concentrate artillery for the attack, the 325th Division would deploy its artillery next to the 3rd Division's artillery so that they could coordinate fire. The Corps also assigned two anti-aircraft artillery regiments to cover the two columns, and it gave the 673rd Anti-Aircraft Artillery Division overall air defence responsibility for the attack. The 3rd Division would hold its positions and let the deep penetration columns pass through. Then the division would launch a secondary attack with two organic regiments and the independent 25th Regiment. One regiment would advance down the western side of Route 1 and seize villages and key terrain right up to the airbase perimeter. Another regiment would attack on the easten side of Route 1 and capture the small port of Ninh Chu, located some 2km north of Phan Rang. The third regiment would remain in reserve. The reinforced 25th Regiment would launch another assault against the airbase. A recently formed local-force battalion would attempt to cut Route 11 between the airbase and Phan Rang.

In essence, PAVN massed over 70 armoured vehicles to support the attack of two divisions against the depleted defenders of Phan Rang. Once the deep-penetration groups punctured the ARVN lines and entered Phan Rang, units in the lead element would fan out in several directions to secure the city. They would then assist the assault on the airbase and set up a blocking position on Route 1 south of Phan Rang to seal off ARVN's overland escape route. To emphasise the corps commander's intent, the PAVN chief of the Armour Branch personally issued instructions to the 4th Tank Battalion's commander: "you must attack at high speed, use heavy firepower to break through the enemy's outer defence lines, and rapidly penetrate all the way into Phan Rang. No matter what happens, do not stop your attack".

As night fell on 15 April, the South Vietnamese forces in Phan Rang were reorganised in the following manner: The VNAF 6th Air Division would provide air support, offsetting the lack of artillery, while the VNN provided the frigates *Tran Nhat Duat* (HQ-03) and *Tran Binh Trong* (HQ-05) and several other gunboats that sailed along the coast, supplying naval gunfire support. On the ground, ARVN had concentrated its regular units around the airbase, with the 4th Regiment defending the western side, and the depleted 5th Regiment held the area south of it. Three companies of paratroopers were protecting Route 1: one at Kien Kien, and two south of the Ca Du Mountain. The 31st Ranger Group had one battalion north of the airbase, while elements of the 52nd Ranger Battalion at Ba Rau had pulled back to guard the airbase perimeter. One battalion of RF troops defended Phan Rang City's northern approach at Go Den with a half dozen M48 tanks, while another helped secure the airbase.

Although the North Vietnamese took strict measures to maintain the secrecy of the attack, an orbiting VNAF EC-47 intercepted a radio communication revealing the impeding offensive. Alarm rang at Phan Rang AB and several flights of A-37Bs were launched to attack the Communists convoys entering the Du Long Pass, soon joined by an AC-119K. Despite several vehicles destroyed, the PAVN 325th Division pressed on. Opening the march along Route 1 were again the 4th and 5th Armoured Battalions. While the ARVN defenders were pinned down in their bunkers by an artillery

On 18 April, the PAVN coastal column entered Phan Thiet after the 203rd Armoured Brigade defeated some elements of the ARVN 2nd Division. (PAVN)

barrage, the enemy motorised columns passed by the strong points. By dawn, the 4th Tank Battalion launched a direct attack against the position of Go Den but encountered strong resistance. The VNAF fighter-bombers hit the unit hard, destroying several T-54s. Despite that the enemy was now at their gate, the VNAF pilots of the 82nd Wing continued to fly offensive sorties. The distance to reach the North Vietnamese columns was now so short that the pilots had just time to retract their landing gear before diving to attack. Between 6:00 a.m. and 9:00 a.m. the A-37Bs flew 37 sorties while their own base was shelled. The commander of the 325th Division requested that the anti-aircraft artillery battalions speed up to offer better protection.

Meanwhile, the PAVN 3rd Division also started attacking. After capturing several villages west of Route 1, another regiment attacked Ca Du Mountain defended by the paratroopers. After bypassing the blown-up bridges near Kien Kien, it joined forces with those of the 325th Division. After a pause to reconsider their options, the North Vietnamese resumed their attack along three axes. A column was sent towards the airbase, another against the Dao Long Bridge, some 5km north of the city, and against the port of Ninh Chu.

Once the bridge was taken, the 4th Tank Battalion routed the RF after a 45-minute fight but again lost two more T-54s after a brief engagement with the M48s. The tanks then advanced cautiously inside the city, stopping to engage any resistance positions installed in the buildings. The infantry that accompanied them also deployed 76.2mm and 85mm guns in direct fire against any houses suspected of sheltering ARVN troops and rapid firing 37mm AA guns were used to engage enemy machine guns installed atop buildings. By noon, the North Vietnamese were masters of the downtown.

Part of the armoured task force then headed to an important bridge on Route 1 just south of the city, effectively sealing off the overland escape route. The other tanks now surged forward to take the ports of Tan Thanh and Ninh Chu where some ARVN troops were being taken onboard fishing ships. The T-54 number 763 arrived first on the pier and calmly aimed at the departing ships. The gunner claimed three ships sunk, and another damaged with only four 100mm rounds.

Major General An now ordered the 325th Division to eliminate the last vestige of South Vietnamese around the airbase in combination with the 25th Regiment. By 8:45 a.m. the 5th Armoured Battalion with Type 63s and K-63s was attacking along Route 11 towards the airbase, while the 25th Regiment was taking over the northern perimeter. The appearance of the tanks caused panic among the ragtag troops of the 5th Regiment that abandoned their positions. The 4th Regiment, the Rangers and paratroopers offered stiffer resistance before breaking out towards the Ca Na Peninsula, some 30km further south, where they boarded rescuing ships. Until the last moment, the VNAF A-37Bs continued to attack the approaching enemy column, knocking out six tanks. The pilots encountered AA fire as soon as taking off, while a helicopter gunship was shot down right over the base by a SA-7. But the North Vietnamese finally entered the airbase defended by armed mechanics. At the last minute, Colonel Le Van Thao, CO of the 92nd Wing, radioed one of his A-37Bs, which landed and picked him up. No other unit of the VNAF in the spring of 1975 fought with as much courage. Other senior officers did not escape: Lieutenant General Nguyen Vinh Nghi was taken prisoner the next day, being the highest-ranking officer ever captured by the North Vietnamese. The VNAF Brigadier General Pham Ngoc Sang was also caught as well as James Lewis,

On 20 April, the PAVN 2nd SAC finally reached Rung La, some 20km from Xuan Loc. Soon, its units would join the ongoing battle. (PAVN)

a CIA operative. He would be released in December 1975 after suffering terrible torture.

After securing Phan Rang, the 2nd SAC took no respite and resumed its advance down Route 1 the next day in order to join the ongoing Xuan Loc battle. It was decided to give to the CO of the 203rd Armoured Brigade, Colonel Nguyen Duc Hien, the direction of the vanguard column of the 2nd SAC. Placing him at the forefront of the leading armoured units, he was the most able to react to any tactical developments. The PAVN 3rd Division meanwhile had been reinforced by another 1,000 recruits just landed by ships at Cam Rang. Instead of marching against Xuan Loc, the unit was ordered to take Vung Tau, sealing off any escape route by sea from Saigon. The VNAF concentrated its attacks on the coastal column but without the vigour necessary, being diverted to the more urgent situation around Xuan Loc. Moreover, the closest VNAF base, Bien Hoa, was currently under sporadic artillery bombardment. The North Vietnamese sources reported that several convoys were nevertheless hard hit, with the aircraft being guided by a VNN SEAL team infiltrated from the sea. At the Ca Na Peninsula, Route 1 ran parallel the seashore and where the VNN warships joined in with shore bombardments, forcing the 325th Division to deploy its artillery along the coastal road, alongside AA batteries and tanks, against the warships. They claimed four ships sunk or knocked out, including one by a Type 63 tank of the 5th Armoured Battalion. One of the damaged ships was the LST *Vung Tau* (HQ-503) that was trying to recover ARVN troops escaped from Phan Rang.

The next obstacle on the march of the 2nd SAC was Phan Thiet, which had been completely surrounded since the end of March. The local commander, Colonel Ngo Tan Nghia, had reorganised its depleted forces: three RF battalions and the 6th Regiment, 2nd Division, though in fact, like the 5th Regiment, it was only a skeleton of a unit, of no more than a battalion strength. There were also the survivors of the 24th Ranger Group that walked down from the Central Highlands as well as 15 M113s. They were able to check the advance of the PAVN 812th Regiment but now they had to stand against a whole North Vietnamese Corps. The PAVN 5th Armoured Battalion continued to push south and launched an attack against an RF roadblock at around 60km north of Phan Thiet on the night of 17 April. The fighting was confused as the tanks were entangled in minefields and subjected to several air strikes. By dawn, a reconnaissance column made up of 10 Type 63s and six K-63s captured the Song Cai Bridge, allowing its crossing by the 4th and 5th Tank Battalions, soon followed by the rest of the 203rd Armoured Brigade. A group of ARVN M113s that was withdrawing towards the city was completely wiped out. Another APC suddenly appeared at the entrance of a street. Without hesitation, driver Thai Ba Sinh of a Type 63, numbered 146, rammed it. The shocked crew surrendered without more resistance. At 9:00 p.m. on 18 April, Phan Thiet was cleared by the 325th Division of the last pockets of resistance. Under intense pressure to continue towards Saigon as fast as possible, the 2nd SAC turned over the city administration to the few local Communist forces at hand. The coastal column then pressed on down Route 1. This allowed the VNN ships to continue to retrieve ARVN defenders along the beaches further east of the town using LCM landing craft and even some M113s could be extracted. Trying to stop the advancing column, on the night of 19 April, ARVN troops blew up a major bridge on Route 1. It made no difference and within 45 minutes, PAVN engineers laid down a pontoon bridge. On 20 April, the leading tanks of the 203rd Armoured Brigade reached Rung La, a town only 20km from Xuan Loc. The unit had travelled more than 900km in 12 days. Two days later, the entire 2nd SAC occupied the refugee centre of Ham Tan, ready to be redirected against Xuan Loc where one the most ferocious battle of the conflict was taking place.

4

LAST STAND AT XUAN LOC

Since 17 March, the ARVN 18th Division of Brigadier General Le Minh Dao in in Xuan Loc had been engaging the PAVN 4th SAC along Route 20, but after suffering substantial losses, the North Vietnamese stopped their advance within striking distance of the city. What made Xuan Loc the focal point for the PAVN attack was its strategic location. The city, situated 60km northeast of Saigon,

The CO of the ARVN 18th Division in Xuan Loc was Brigadier General Le Minh Dao. He turned out to be one of the most outstanding ARVN officers of the campaign for his stalwart defence of the city. Taken prisoner after the fall of Saigon, Dao would be imprisoned for 18 years by the Communists. (ARVN)

controlled Dau Giay, the vital junction of Routes 1 and 20, two of the three main paved highways that linked Saigon with the eastern part of the country. The place also shielded the eastern approach of the huge logistic base of Long Binh and Bien Hoa AB. With the destruction of the ARVN I and II Corps, Xuan Loc had suddenly become a critical node on the improvised defensive line the desperate South Vietnamese were trying to form around Saigon. Most observers realised that whatever slim chance ARVN had of defending the capital from encircling enemy was predicated on holding Xuan Loc. If ARVN could make a stand there, a chance remained that it could regroup its battered forces and save the country from defeat. Because of its importance, Xuan Loc, or literally "Spring of Happiness" in Vietnamese, would soon become the site of the fiercest battle of the 1975 offensive.

By early April, General Tra acted swiftly and decided to implement the next stage of the PAVN overall offensive plan for the B2 Front. If he could take Xuan Loc, his troops would drive unopposed into Saigon. If he failed, he would wait the arrival of reinforcements as cautioned by Dung. Together, by taking the city, they would open the north-eastern gate of Saigon to the PAVN 2nd and 3rd SACs.

Since the end of March, Brigadier General Dao had decided to strengthen the defences of Xuan Loc. The city sat amidst numerous banana and rubber plantations at the base of the southern end of the Annamite Mountains and the hilly terrain to the west of the city was covered by thick forest and was crisscrossed by several small rivers and streams. To the east, the land was more open, but dominated by Chua Chan Mountain, a botanical reserve of Saigon's Science Institute. While Dao had more than a full week to prepare for the expected attack, his forces were stretched thin. Two of the three regiments were outside the city: the 52nd Regiment was guarding the Route 20 area on the western perimeter at the Dau Giay Intersection, while the 48th Regiment was 120km away defending Tay Ninh. In early April, he had only the 43rd Regiment, rear base personnel, and the division reconnaissance company holding Xuan Loc. They were reinforced by four RF battalions, the attached 5th ACS with 60 M113s and 15 M41s, a troop of V150 armoured cars, as well as 50 artillery pieces, including twenty-four 105mm and twelve 155mm howitzers of the division's organic artillery regiment and RF batteries.

Troops of the ARVN 43rd Regiment, 18th Division, deployed on the eastern perimeter of Xuan Loc. (US Army)

First, he had to bring back the 48th Regiment. The III Corps' CO, General Toan, agreed but requested one of its battalions be sent to Ham Tan to defend the huge refugee settlement there. The unit was flown back on 5 April and placed in the defence of the south-western perimeter, particularly the Tan Phong Intersection. It was also there that Dao placed his main headquarters and two troops of the 5th CAS to use as a reserve for counterattacks. On 8 April, the 82nd Ranger Battalion that had been extracted from the Central Highlands by helicopters had just landed on the local airfield, in the same sector. It was intended to move thereafter to Long Binh for rest and reequipping. In fact, caught in the enemy offensive, the Rangers would instead be placed immediately under Dao's control. Toan, suspicious that the North Vietnamese would attack Xuan Loc, also moved TF-322 of the 3rd Armoured Brigade closer to the city along Route 1 at Tran Bom.

Dao evacuated many of the families of his soldiers and other civilians towards the Long Binh logistic centre so that they did not have to fear for them, while he also reinforced his defensive positions by expanding the existing system of bunkers and trenches. His artillery positions were also reinforced with bunkers to pull the guns back into after they fired. Dao's artillery chief preregistered all his pieces onto likely avenues of approach by creating what he called a "meat grinder". Because ARVN stockpiles of fuel and ammunition, especially artillery shells were low, beginning in February, Dao had

On 5 April 1975, Brigadier General Dao recalled the 48th Regiment, 18th Division, from Tay Ninh. The unit was flown back by VNAF helicopters and placed in defence of Xuan Loc. (US Army)

begun to secretly stockpile artillery ammunition, in direct violation of JGS regulations, by reducing his daily artillery expenditure by 20 percent.

After receiving orders from Lieutenant General Tran Van Tra, Major General Hoang Cam, CO of the 4th SAC, began planning the attack against Xuan Loc, scheduled to start on 9 April. On 4 April, he ordered the PAVN 7th Division, which was 160km away near Dalat, to immediately head south to Xuan Loc. The unit was assigned the mission of mounting the main attack, striking from the east to seize the ARVN 18th Division headquarters, then move into the city. The 341st Division would be responsible for the secondary attack, striking from the north to take the Long Khanh Province Headquarters and other targets in the city. The attached 6th Division would circle south of the city and attack the Dau Giay Intersection and several key points along Route 1 west of Xuan Loc, severing communications with Saigon. The three North Vietnamese divisions were reinforced by 70 T-54s and Type 59s of the 2nd and 21st Tank Battalions of the 26th Armoured Group, the long-range 130mm guns of the 24th Artillery Regiment, the 71st Anti-Aircraft Artillery Regiment, the 24th and 25th Engineer Regiments, as well as two local forces battalions.

The PAVN 7th Division did not arrive at its assembly area until the night of 7 April. Its orders were to destroy the ARVN 48th Regiment and liberate the intersection of Route 1 and 2 at the village of Tan Phong south of Xuan Loc, but at the last moment the orders changed. Instead, the division was to liberate the city first in a frontal assault and only then focus on destroying the 48th. With less than one day to develop another plan, the division's CO decided that the 165th Regiment would lead the primary attack against the 18th Division's rear base in the north-eastern part of the city and the 52nd Regiment's base camp. The 209th Regiment would liberate Route 1 from Suoi Cat, a small village about 15km east of Xuan Loc to the Tan Phong Intersection and attack up from the south into the city. The 141st Regiment would serve as a reserve force. Simultaneously, the 341st Division would also breach the city's northern perimeter. Its 266th Regiment would attack targets inside the city while the 270th Regiment would strike Kiem Tan and Thi Mountain, which housed an artillery battalion, a communication centre, and the ARVN 2nd Battalion, 43rd Regiment.

The 4th SAC shifted its headquarters to a position northeast of Xuan Loc, coordinated artillery fire for all elements, and established supply routes to its three main assault units. It also sent a forward headquarters under Deputy Corps Commander Bui Cat Vu to Chua Chan Mountain east of the city to oversee the attack. H-hour was set for 5:30 a.m. on 9 April. If the PAVN assault on Xuan Loc produced another precipitous ARVN retreat, nothing would stand between the 4th SAC and Saigon, except the 1st Airborne Brigade and TF-322.

As night fell on 8 April, Brigadier General Dao had arrayed his forces in the following manner: the 52nd Regiment and one troop of M113s from the 5th ACS were defending Route 20 and the vital Dau Giay Intersection. One battalion was stationed south of Dau Giay at the small village of Pham Boi Chau. The northernmost element was a company on top of Horseshoe Hill, a small hill on the eastern side of Route 20 near Ghost Mountain, the high ground on the western side of Xuan Loc. The 2nd Battalion, 43rd Regiment, defended Thi Mountain, the high ground on the western side of Xuan Loc. This left a worrisome gap in the lines between the 52nd and the city, which Dao could cover only by artillery. The 18th Division's reconnaissance company, reinforced with .50-Cal machine guns, held the high school on the north-western approach to the city, with two RF battalions on their right flank. Two other RF battalions occupied positions inside the city. The 1st and 3rd Battalions of the 43rd Regiment protected the eastern perimeter. The 1st Battalion, 48th Regiment, and the other two cavalry troops (M41s and M113s) were in reserve, while the 2nd Battalion was detached for guard duty at Ham Tan Harbour. The 3rd Battalion was positioned astride Route 1 leading east out of the city. The 82nd Ranger Battalion held Xuan Loc airfield.

During the morning hours of 9 April, the PAVN attack elements moved into their starting positions. The 6th Division crossed undetected Route 2, a dirt plantation road, south of Xuan Loc and moved rapidly though the rubber trees north towards Route 1. The 7th and 341st Divisions moved up close to the ARVN perimeter wires. By 5:00 a.m. all elements reported that they were in their assigned assault positions. However, artillery observers noticed that the overnight fog had not adequately lifted, and they requested a 10-minute postponement for the artillery preparation. At 5:40 a.m., the 4th SAC gave the signal for both the Corps and divisional artillery to open fire simultaneously. In an hour, some 4,000 shells rained on the city.

Both the PAVN 7th and 341st Divisions surged forwards against the eastern and northern defensive lines. In the eastern sector the 165th Regiment led the onslaught, followed by the 209th Regiment, supported by a dozen T-54s of the 2nd Tank Battalion. On fairly open ground, Dao had prepared for such a combined tank and infantry assault by constructing strong defensive works. The 7th Division would have to move uphill across open fields, penetrate eight barbed-wire barriers, navigate several minefields, and scale an earthen berm before finally reaching the trench lines held by ARVN soldiers. The South Vietnamese artillery now began pounding the advancing enemy columns, soon followed by VNAF jets. The assault stalled temporarily, but the North Vietnamese mounted a second charge with the tanks that now had caught up following their delay. When the Communist troops were nearing the ARVN lines, the 43rd Regiment had another surprise for them: 2.75-inch (70mm) rockets, normally used by helicopter gunships, mounted on bipods. The 209th Regiment ran into the 82nd Ranger Battalion at the airfield and could not advance further along Route 1. By midday, the 7th Division was pinned down, with four T-54s knocked out, including three by TOW missiles.

The PAVN 341st Division on the northern side of Xuan Loc initially fared better. With less-open terrain, the 266th Regiment quickly breached the five barbed-wire-fence lines with the support of a company of T-54s of the 21st Tank Battalion. Its target was the high school, the marketplace, and the Catholic church. However, ARVN artillery soon began hitting the PAVN soldiers, while a VNAF AC-119 laid down a stream of tracers along the breach. Checked by the RF troops, the North Vietnamese

The North Vietnamese assault against Xuan Loc started on 9 April 1975. The three Communist divisions were supported by the M-46 130mm long-range guns of the 24th Artillery Regiment. (PAVN)

In addition to the 4th SAC heavy artillery assets, each of the three PAVN divisions attacking Xuan Loc had their own organic artillery regiment, like these 122mm howitzers belonging to the 341st Division. (PAVN)

Supporting the PAVN 6th Division was this DKB MRL, a rocket launching system produced in North Vietnam, with six 122mm rocket launcher tubes. (PAVN)

On 9 April, the PAVN 266th Regiment, 341st Division, supported by the T-54s of the 21st Tank Battalion breached Xuan Loc's northern perimeter and entered the city near the Catholic church. (PAVN)

Troops of the PAVN the 266th Regiment, 341st Division, entering the north-western part of Xuan Loc on 9 April. They were soon expelled from the conquered positions by vigorous ARVN counterattacks. (PAVN)

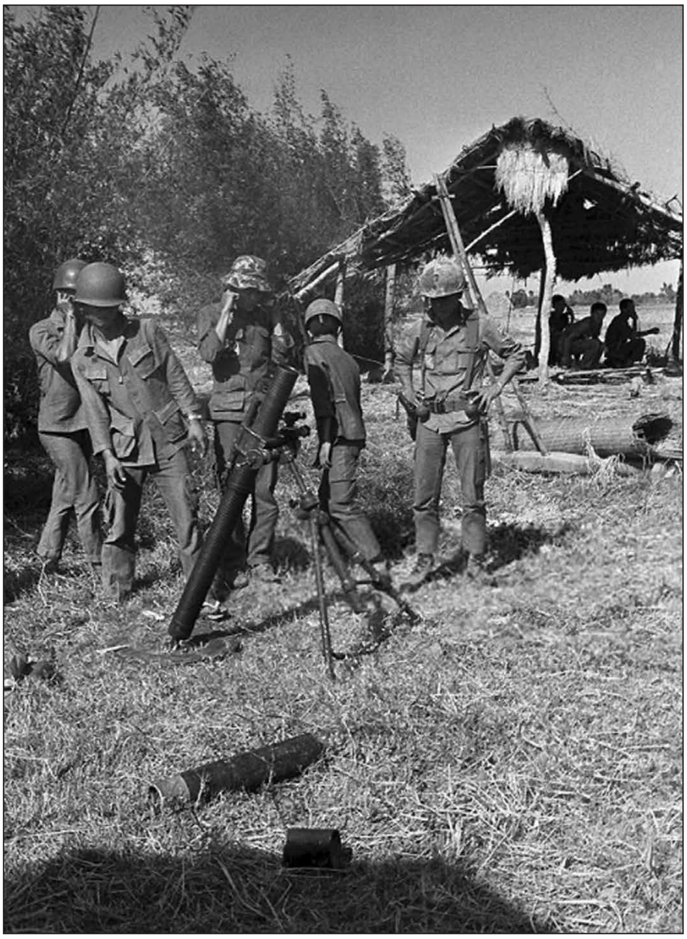
A battery of M101 105mm howitzers of the ARVN 18th Division pounded the North Vietnamese positions around Xuan Loc on 10 April. (US Army)

troops managed to bypass the high school and infiltrated about 300m into the town, where they occupied positions near the market square, the church, and the province sector headquarters, where they knocked out seven M113s and V100s for the loss of two T-54s. Further out to the west, the PAVN 270th Regiment had hit Thi Mountain, but it was also driven back.

Wasting no time, Dao launched a counterattack outside the city. He used his reserve force, the 1st Battalion, 48th Regiment, and the armour from the 5th ACS, to attempt to encircle the enemy troops who had penetrated the city. The 270th Regiment immediately launched an attack to halt Dao's manoeuvre and succeeded in preventing the 266th Regiment from being surrounded. Still, the situation for the unit was precarious. At the end of the first day, the 341st Division had taken very heavy casualties, close to 600 men.

The PAVN 6th Division meanwhile was the most successful. Its 274th Regiment attacked and occupied the Mother Holding Baby Pass, thus blocking Route 1 between Xuan Loc and Dau Giay Intersection. It struck precisely where Dao had no troops, and in doing so, it cut Dao from his 52nd Regiment. The PAVN 33rd Regiment, meanwhile, attacked the hamlets of Hung Ngia and Hung Loc on Route 1 on the western side of Dau Giay. It took Hung Loc but was repulsed by Popular Forces at Hung Nghia. An attack on the Dau Giay Intersection was defeated by the 1st Battalion, 52nd Regiment, dug-in nearby at the Phan Boi Chau Hamlet. However, the 52nd Regiment was now cut off from both Xuan Loc and Saigon.

Throughout the night, the North Vietnamese struggled to resupply their troops in the town and its outskirts while the PAVN artillery harassed the defenders. At daybreak of 10 April, the 4th SAC renewed its offensive, following the same plan. The PAVN 7th Division now committed in addition to the 165th and 209th Regiments its last reserve, the 141st Regiment plus an anti-aircraft artillery battalion of 37mm guns in a direct-fire role. The 341st Division would move the 270th Regiment into Xuan Loc to support the battered 266th Regiment. After another heavy artillery barrage, the North Vietnamese assault started at 5:30 a.m. with repeated onslaughts by the 7th Division against the eastern perimeter but could not make any headway as artillery and timely air strikes stopped any attacks. On the north-western side, the 270th Regiment launched five assaults against the RF battalions near the marketplace but each time it was thrown back. The company of tanks that should



Troops of the ARVN 82nd Ranger Battalion manning an 81mm mortar during the fighting in the south-western part of Xuan Loc. (US Army)

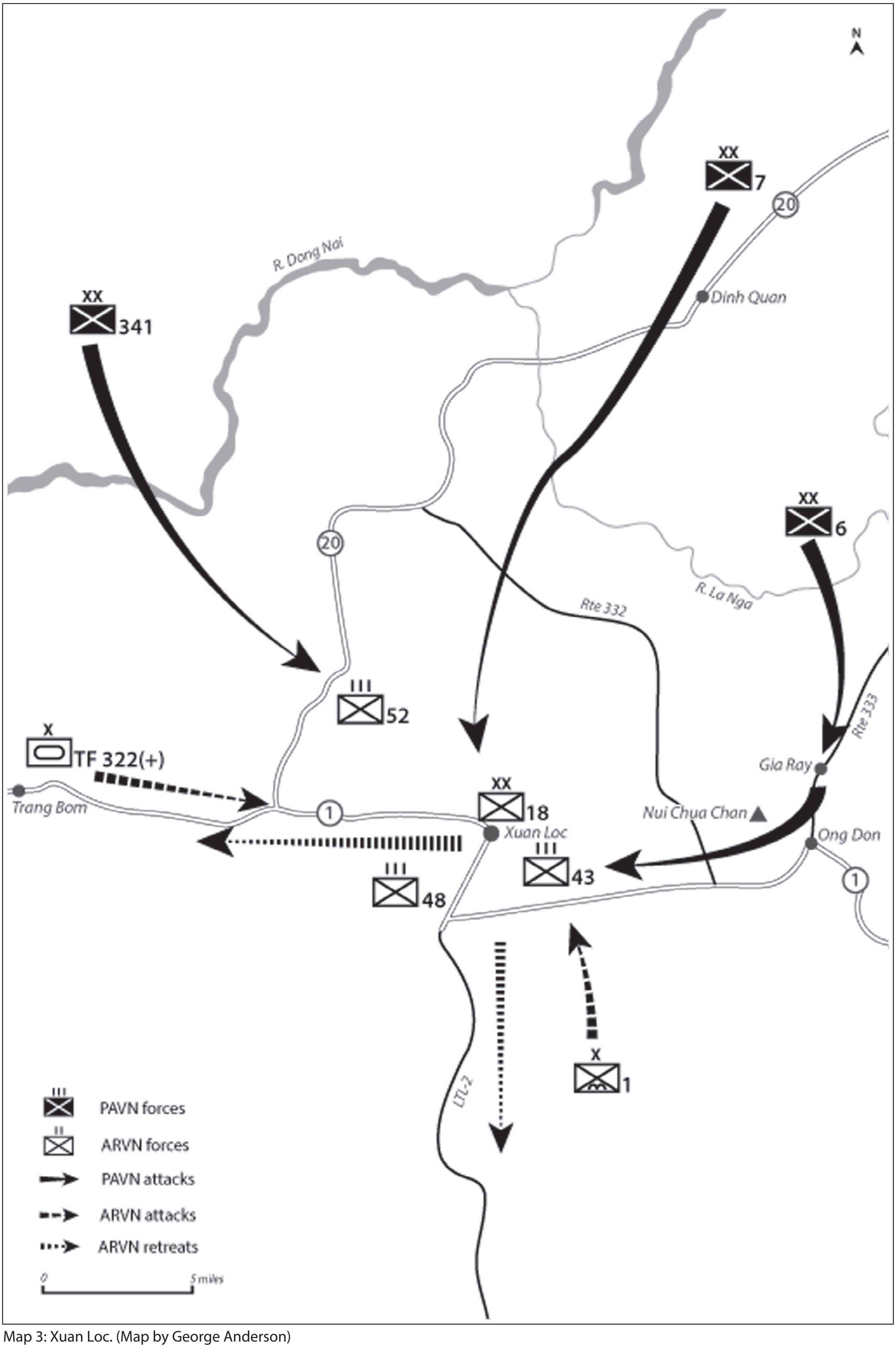
The North Vietnamese faced fierce resistance when assaulting Xuan Loc. These troops of the ARVN 18th Division rejoiced after capturing enemy flags. (ARVN)

M113s of the 5th ACR, the organic armoured unit of the ARVN 18th Division, counterattacked and cleared out the quarters of Xuan Loc by 12 April. (ARVN)

have supported it was late and advanced through an artillery barrage. When it did reach the outskirts of the city, the tanks advanced alone without infantry support into the streets and ARVN tank-killer teams destroyed 4 T-54s with M72 LAW rockets. Hand-to-hand fighting broke out at one point, the South Vietnamese using hand grenades and bayonets to retake the lost quarters. West of Xuan Loc, Toan ordered TF-322 and two battalions of the 1st Airborne Brigade to overcome the PAVN 6th Division roadblock on Route 1 but they encountered a stiff resistance. Using dugout camouflaged positions, the North Vietnamese opened fire at close range with B-10 82mm recoilless guns, putting out of action 11 M41 and M48 tanks. As afternoon wore on, Dao counterattacked again. One by one, ARVN forces cleared the buildings PAVN had captured the day before. By nightfall on 10 April, Xuan Loc was totally in South Vietnamese hands.

The evening provided no respite for the ARVN defenders as Communist artillery continued to shell the city throughout the night. The South Vietnamese responded with counterbattery fires and air strikes. Several VNAF AC-119 gunships took turns to attack the enemy supply convoys. Despite the heavy losses, the PAVN commanders would not relent. On the morning of the third day, 11 April, the 4th SAC ordered the 341st Division to shift its attack to hit the 43rd Regiment and link up with the 7th Division which also resumed its assault. After an intense 30-minute artillery barrage, the general attack started at 5:30 a.m. but the results were the same. The enemy columns were pinned down in place by artillery. The A-37 and F-5 fighter-bombers attacked the enemy concentrations of troops with bombs, napalm, and CBU-55 fuel air explosives. ARVN counterattacks stopped any penetrations and reclaimed lost ground. Virtually, all the 85mm and 37mm guns deployed for direct fire support by the 341st Division had been destroyed. Three T-54s of the 2nd Tank Battalion that were heading towards the airfield were also destroyed by the M41s. Four T-54s, survivors out of a company of 12, however, held a small salient on the eastern sector with the 209th Regiment. Dao meanwhile had recalled the battalion sent to guard the refugees at Ham Tan, which was ferried back by helicopters. By the end of the day, the North Vietnamese again had not taken the city, and their casualties were extremely heavy and growing. The 4th SAC had lost more than 2,000 men, including 1,200 casualties for the 341st Division in three days of heavy fighting. Eleven T-54s lay destroyed inside the ARVN lines.

However, Xuan Loc was still isolated from Saigon, and it was more than ever urgent to overcome the roadblock of the PAVN 6th Division. TF-322 continued to try to punch through but again


N
XX
7
20
R. Dong Nai
Dinh Quan
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341
XX
6
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R. La Nga
Rte 332
III
52
Rte 333
X
TF 322(+)
Gia Ray
Trang Bom
1
XX
18
Nui Chua Chan
Xuan Loc
Ong Don
III
43
III
48
1
LTL-2
X
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PAVN forces
ARVN forces
PAVN attacks
ARVN attacks
ARVN retreats
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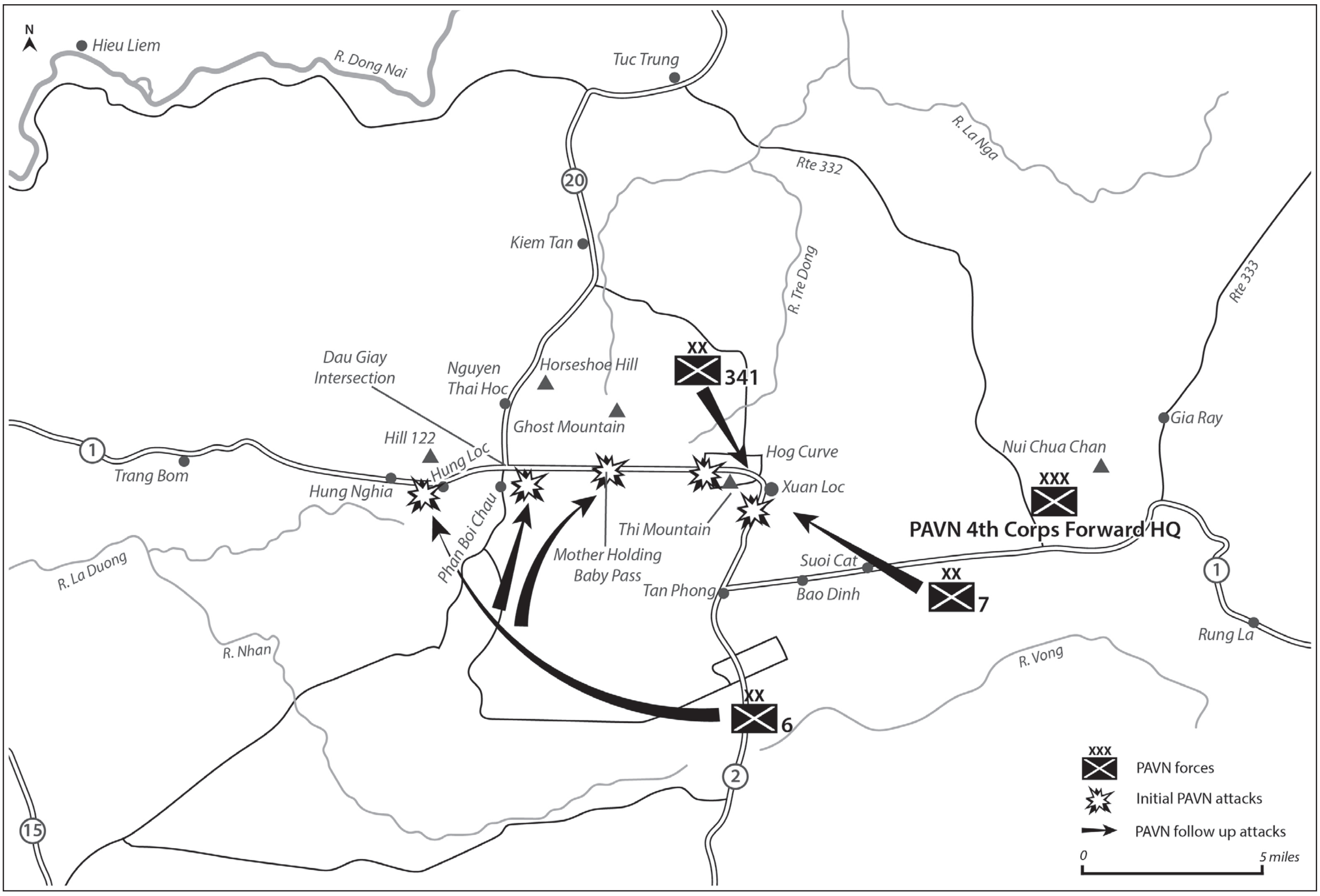
5 miles

Map 3: Xuan Loc. (Map by George Anderson)


N
Hieu Liem
R. Dong Nai
Tuc Trung
R. La Nga
Rte 332
20
Kiem Tan
R. Tre Dong
Rte 333
XX
341
Dau Giay Intersection
Nguyen Thai Hoc
Horseshoe Hill
Ghost Mountain
Hill 122
Hung Loc
1
Trang Bom
Hung Nghia
Hog Curve
Xuan Loc
Gia Ray
Nui Chua Chan
XXX
PAVN 4th Corps Forward HQ
Phan Boi Chau
Thi Mountain
Mother Holding Baby Pass
R. La Duong
Suoi Cat
Bao Dinh
Tan Phong
XX
7
1
Rung La
R. Nhan
R. Vong
XX
6
2
15
XXX
PAVN forces
Initial PAVN attacks
PAVN follow up attacks
0
5 miles

Map 4: Xuan Loc (Map by George Anderson)

bogged down in face of a stiff resistance. Toan now decided to commit the full 3rd Armoured Brigade for the task. The remaining TF-315 and TF-318 arrived from Cu Chi the same day. The armoured brigade was reinforced by an artillery battalion, the 8th Regiment, 5th Division, as well as the 33rd Ranger Battalion. In a second echelon that could either reinforce Brigadier General Khoi's 3rd Armoured Brigade, or protect Long Binh and Bien Hoa, was the depleted 468th Marine Brigade, with only two battalions. Khoi immediately launched his armour into the attack, and one of his task forces made the main attack along Route 1, while he sent a second task force to the north. Khoi's units, however, were again unable to break through. Thus, although cut off and under artillery fire, the 52nd Regiment still held a line running from south of Dau Giay Intersection at Pham Boi Chau hamlet, moving north up Route 20 to its furthermost position on Horseshoe Hill. Guessing that the regiment could hold its position until the 3rd Armoured Brigade could joint it, Dao ordered its 2nd Battalion to move from Dau Giay to reinforce Xuan Loc. After sneaking through enemy lines, the battalion broke through and joined the 43rd Regiment on the afternoon of 12 April.

Toan also decided at the same time to move the 2,000 men of the 1st Airborne Brigade inside the city's perimeter. That afternoon, in the last significant air assault of the war, a first wave of 100 UH-1Hs landed the paratroopers on the fringe of a rubber plantation near Tan Phong, southeast of Xuan Loc, at a cost of two helicopters shot down. Immediately engaged by the PAVN 7th Division, the Airborne troops fought back, supported by VNAF A-1s and A-37s to secure the landing zone. The rest of the brigade were deployed the next day, including its artillery battalion moved by CH-47As. The Chinooks also brought in 93 tons of ammunition the same day, and another 100 tons on 13 April. The Airborne troops moved in and linked up with those of the 43rd Regiment after inflicting heavy casualties on the PAVN 209th Regiment.

The night did not bring respite as the North Vietnamese artillery was again pouring in 130mm shells. By 3:00 a.m., 12 April, PAVN again launched a concerted attack by the 7th and 341st Divisions. Their advancing columns were attacked by VNAF fighter-bombers while two AC-119s put down a curtain of fire around the defensive perimeters. The C-130As used in a bomber role also hit the enemy concentrations. A group of T-54s reached the marketplace where they were engaged by the M41s of the 5th ACS. No matter that the North Vietnamese tanks were better armed and armoured, and equipped with infrared night vision equipment, the ARVN tankers engaged them in a close distance, confused tank battle. The South Vietnamese troops deployed two 105mm howitzers to fire directly against enemy infantry trying to capture the sector beside the Catholic church. By dawn, the Communists attacked again until they had been pushed back. They were assembling for a third assault, but the VNAF flew 20 sorties, breaking up their formations even before they could reach ARVN positions. As the North Vietnamese were pulling back, Dao quickly pushed forward and reoccupied the previously taken outlying areas, the last PAVN pockets of resistance in the seminary had been eliminated. Nine additional T-54 tanks were destroyed.

In the afternoon, VNAF Hercules dropped two BLU-82 giant bombs northwest and east of the city against concentrations of troops and the entire city shook as if rocked by an earthquake. Electronic intercepts by an EC-47 indicated that the detonations killed over 500 Communist troops. Refugees that crossed the areas also reported seeing hundreds of North Vietnamese dead. During

The ARVN 1st Airborne Brigade was inserted into Xuan Loc on 11 and 12 April. These paratroopers boarded VNAF CH-47As of the 237th Helicopter Squadron, 43rd Helicopter Wing, Bien Hoa AB. (VNAF)

the last 24 hours, the VNAF had flown some 200 tactical sorties in an effort particularly appreciated by the defenders of Xuan Loc who compared it to the "good old days of the American air support". In fact, operating from the nearby Tan Son Nhut and Bien Hoa airbases, the pilots could fly up to three missions per day.

After the setbacks in the Mekong Delta, Tay Ninh, and now Xuan Loc, the PAVN Commander in Chief, Senior General Van Tien Dung, moved to rein in Tra's grandiose attack plan, advising that he should reinforce and replenish his troops before renewing his offensive. Tra went directly to the 4th SAC headquarters to personally assess the situation and draw new plans. Tra realised that continuing to carry out frontal attacks would be too costly. It would be better to focus the attacks further west against the less-defended Dau Giay Intersection. The task was assigned to both the 6th Division, already operating in the area, and the 341st Division. Securing the crossroad was vital to block any advance attempted by the ARVN 3rd Armoured Brigade. The 7th Division on its side was ordered to fix the rest of the 18th Division inside Xuan Loc, allowing additional time for the 2nd and 3rd SACs coming from the north to join in. Tra understood that as long as the ARVN 18th Division had effective air support, his troops would have an extremely difficult time taking the ruined city. He planned to covertly move 130mm artillery within range of Bien Hoa AB and shell it in order to paralyse the airfield.

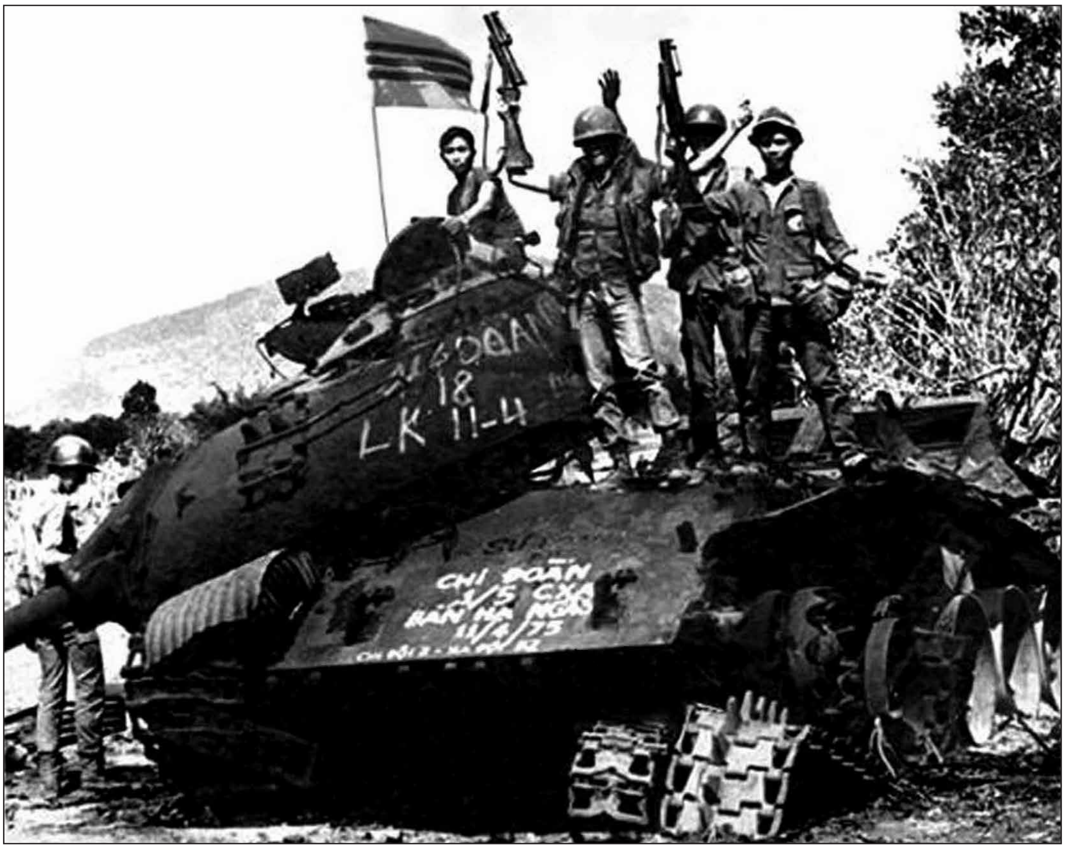
However, while rearranging his forces, the 4th SAC launched another direct attack on 13 April at dawn. Once again, it was the 43rd Regiment that was targeted by the 7th Division. The attack again failed and by midday, the North Vietnamese pulled back, abandoning 235 dead. Another assault in the afternoon met the same results. However, these attacks allowed the 341st Division to be pulled out of the city to be redirected towards Dau Giay. Xuan Loc continued to be shelled throughout the day. However, two camouflaged batteries of 130mm guns were spotted by VNAF O-1s which called in standing patrols of F-5s to destroy them.

On 14 April, Tra received as reinforcement the 95B Regiment that was operating previously in the Central Highlands. Two additional companies of APCs on K-63s and BTR-152s, one of T-54 tanks, additional artillery pieces and AA guns were added to the attacking forces. Massive artillery attacks and large infantry assaults by the 33rd Regiment, 6th Division, pushed the ARVN 1st Battalion, 52nd Regiment, out of the hamlet of Pham Boi Chau back to the very edge of Dau Giay. The 52nd Regiment commander ordered two companies of the 3rd Battalion to link up with the 1st Battalion and pull it out of Dau Giay. Moving at night through dense bush, the 3rd Battalion successfully rescued what was left of the 1st Battalion. Dau Giay Intersection was now undefended. Surrounded and unable to receive supply, the 52nd Regiment was now in an increasingly precarious position. Losing the 2nd Battalion when Dao pulled it back on 10 April had seriously weakened the regiment's defences.

The VNAF helicopter gunships were also very active during the battle of Xuan Loc. This crew posed beside an armed Huey of the 43rd Helicopter Wing equipped with miniguns and 19-tube rocket launchers for 2.75-in (70mm) rockets. (Nguyen Van Minh Collection)

Troops of the PAVN 7th Division attacking the south-western Xuan Loc perimeter with the support of the T-54s of the 2nd Tank Battalion, 26th Armoured Group. (PAVN)

An M41 of the ARVN 5th ACS counterattacking Xuan Loc's south-western perimeter. (Nguyen Van Minh Collection)



A North Vietnamese T-54 destroyed in the south-western perimeter of Xuan Loc. As indicated on the frontal glacis, it was claimed by the crew of an M41 of the 1st Troop, 5th ACS. (ARVN)

On its side, the ARVN 3rd Armoured Brigade attempted one more time to link up with the 52nd Regiment. Brigadier General Khoi decided to bypass the main roadblock. He sent TF-318 on a flanking manoeuvre to the north of Hung Loc to link up with the 52nd Regiment at the hamlet of Nguyen Thai Hoc on Route 20 just north of Dau Giay. By midday, Khoi's troops had successfully captured Hill 122, the high ground north of Hung Loc. But the North Vietnamese quickly reacted to the surprise move. The 341st Division launched several battalion-sized charges uphill. The armour could not advance far when they encountered a series of rivers and streams requiring engineer bridging equipment that could not be deployed under the current situation. Khoi's attempt to bypass to the north was blocked. The only bright spot for the ARVN during that day was a VNAF BLU-82 attack against the suspected 4th SAC advanced headquarters located some 12km northeast of Xuan Loc. Seventy percent of the headquarters was reportedly destroyed.

Early in the morning of 15 April, the opening phase of the new PAVN plan commenced. An assault sapper squad infiltrated Bien Hoa AB and blew up part of the ammunition dump and the VNAF operations there were effectively shut down for a half day. Then, the PAVN artillery zeroed on the positions held by the 52nd Regiment, putting out of action eight 105mm and four 155mm howitzers. The artillery barrage was followed by a coordinated attack of the 33rd Regiment, 6th Division, and the 95B Regiment against Nguyen Thai Hoc Hamlet and the Horseshoe Hill. After capturing Dau Giay, the 33rd Regiment prepared to assault Nguyen Thai Hoc but it was now forced to redirect its effort to confront a new advance made by the ARVN 3rd Armoured Brigade. But once again, the tanks could not punch through, losing armour to 85mm guns and AT-3 missiles. After halting Khoi's armoured attack, the PAVN 33rd Regiment resumed its attack on Nguyen Thai Hoc in mid-afternoon. On the northern flank, the 95B Regiment probed the Horseshoe Hill, before launching a series of attacks against determined resistance. The waves of North Vietnamese troops were mowed down by the defenders, ably supported by artillery and helicopter gunships. In perhaps the 18th Division's finest moment, in one day of heavy fighting, two ARVN companies had stopped and severely damaged one of the finest PAVN regiments.

The PAVN 7th Division meanwhile also shelled Xuan Loc City to impede its garrison coming to the rescue of the 52nd Regiment. Facing overwhelming force, at 6:00 p.m. the 52nd Regiment's CO, Colonel Ngo Ky Dung, ordered a night retreat back to friendly lines. Fighting virtually to the last round, the men pulled back from the Horseshoe Hill to join the 3rd Battalion. What remained of the 52nd Regiment retreated into Xuan Loc, accompanied by some M113s. They were sorely needed to reinforce the defence of the city.

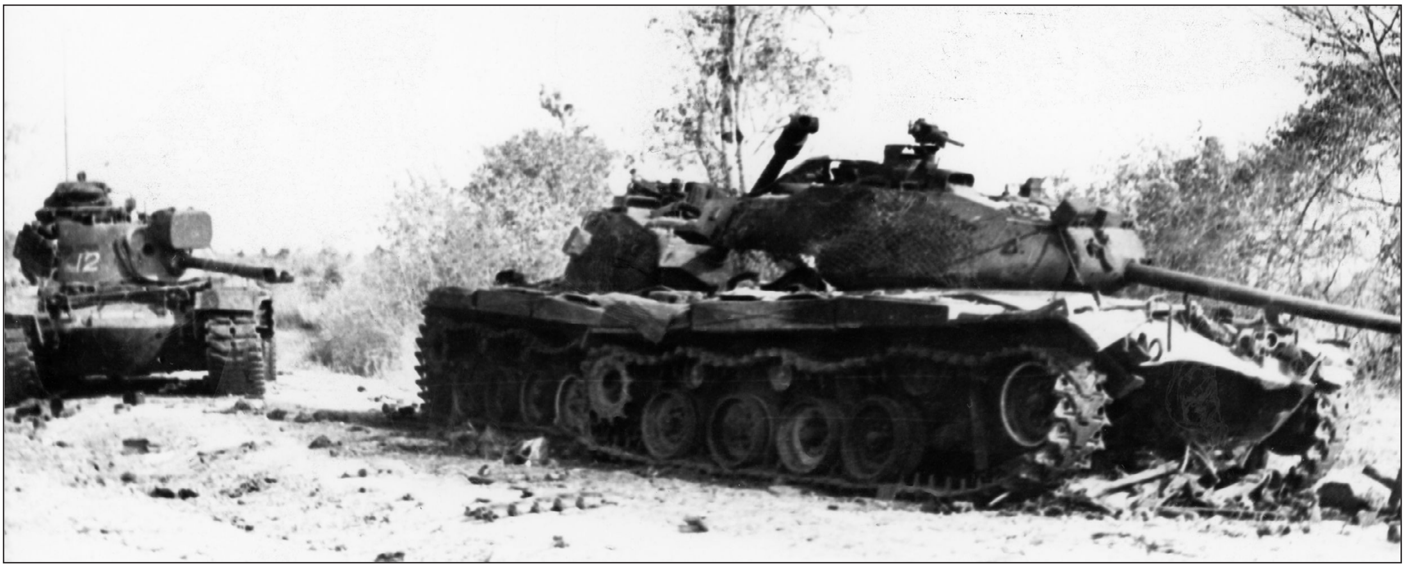
During the Xuan Loc battle, ARVN praised the air support received from VNAF operating from airbases close to the battlefield. Ground crews prepared these two F-5As of the 63 Wing of Bien Hoa for the next sortie. (Anthony J. Tambini)

With direct road access to Xuan Loc cut by PAVN, most of the supplies were brought in by helicopters like these CH-47As of the 237th Helicopter Squadron of Bien Hoa AB. (US Army)

A T-54 of the PAVN 21st Tank Battalion counterattacks an ARVN attempt to reopen Route 1 at the Dau Giay Intersection. (PAVN)

After the fall of Phan Rang the previous day, Lieutenant General Nguyen Van Toan knew that his III Corps had soon to face the PAVN 2nd SAC speeding down the coastal route towards Xuan Loc. If he could not overcome the Dau Giay Intersection roadblock and link up with the 18th Division encircled inside the city, there would be no chance to stop the enemy on his north-eastern perimeter. For three days, from 16 to 18 April, he anxiously ordered the 3rd Armoured Brigade, reinforced with the 8th Regiment, 5th Division, to launch a series of attacks to recapture the Dau Giay Intersection and lift the siege of Xuan Loc before it would be too late. The attack was carried out along two axes: straight down Route 1 by TF-315 and TF-322 and the attached 8th Regiment; and from Hill 122 with TF-318 but anchored along 10 strongpoints the North Vietnamese resisted ferociously. Any penetrations were counterattacked with the support of the T-54s of the 21st Tank Battalion. After losing 40 APCs and tanks, the 3rd Armoured Brigade was pulled back on 19 April.

In the meantime, the PAVN 7th Division continued to launch a series of attacks



The ARVN 3rd Armoured Brigade suffered heavily trying to overwhelm the Dau Giay Intersection. These M41 and M48 tanks of TF-318 were destroyed while trying to reach Hill 122. (PAVN)

By 14 April the North Vietnamese received additional armour to attack Xuan Loc, including K-63 APCs operating with the 21st Tank Battalion in the southeast sector of the front. (PAVN)

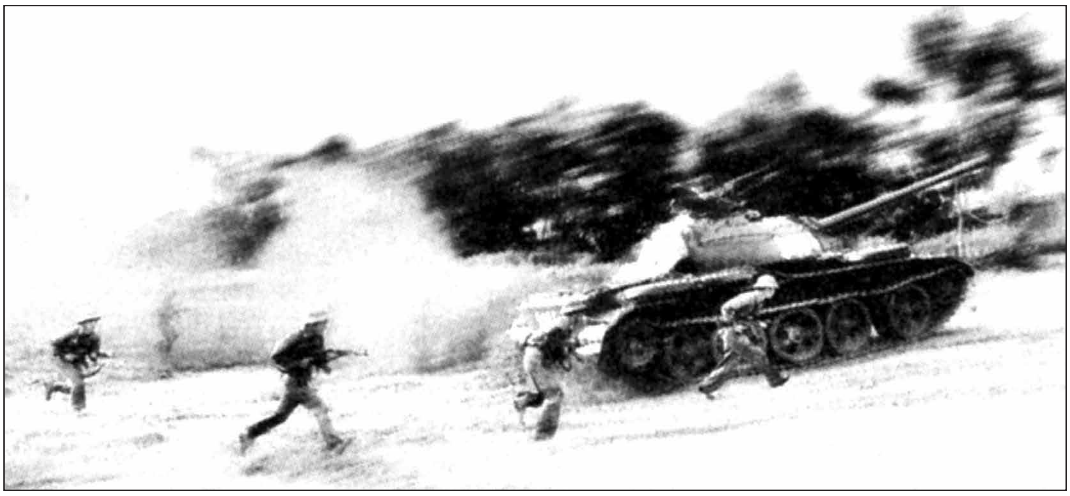
against Xuan Loc, breaching the southwest perimeter but the 48th Regiment counterattacked, knocking out several T-54s. The paratroopers and Rangers near the airfield were also heavily engaged. The 43rd Regiment and the RF troops also fought tenaciously around the railway station and the post office, using 105mm howitzers for direct fire support. The North Vietnamese lost some 21 T-54s in two days of fighting. On the night of 19 April, a Ranger reconnaissance patrol reported that a North Vietnamese regiment, supported by two companies of T-54s, had been spotted some 5km west of the airfield. Dao immediately requested air support. Several flights of A-37Bs attacked the area with CBU-55 FAEs before the artillery took over and the Communists pulled back in disorder, abandoning several armoured vehicles.

Even if VNAF support continued to be outstanding, it was now more and more difficult for the airmen to operate from Bien Hoa AB. Since 11 April, the 75th Artillery Group had decided to dispatch a battery of four M-46 130mm guns in the proximity of Bien Hoa AB to disrupt its air operations. The task was assigned to the 26th Artillery Company under Captain Nguyen Xuan Tach. The heavily camouflaged unit travelled by night, sometimes cutting across ARVN controlled areas. The unit finally settled in the contested sector of Hieu Liem, a wooded area northwest of Bien Hoa, on the night of 13 April. Even that placed the guns at their extreme range. The battery opened fire against the airbase the next evening, firing 30 shells and in a game of cat and mouse, the battery opened fire and immediately moved to another location to escape the VNAF observation flights and counterbattery fires. Over 12 days, the battery lobbed 326 shells; some days, it fired only on four occasions, others as many as 10 times. The shelling cratered the runways and damaged several aircraft but did not stop the air operations. In the air, the fighter-bombers faced more and more anti-aircraft artillery fire, including from radar-directed 57mm and 85mm guns as well as SA-2 firings.

A BTR-152 moving towards the Dau Giay Intersection in support of the PAVN 341st Division. (PAVN)

Lieutenant General Nguyen Van Toan, like most of the ARVN top leadership, was stunned by the pace at which the North

By 14 April, the North Vietnamese began to shell Bien Hoa Airbase with a battery of 130mm guns, disrupting the air operations there. A group of pilots of the 540th Fighter Squadron, 63rd Wing, pose in front of an F-5A donated by the Imperial Iranian Air Force still in its desert camouflage scheme. (Can Thep Collection)



Troops of the PAVN 7th Division launching a new attack against the Xuan Loc south-western perimeter, supported by a T-54 of the 21st Tank Battalion. (PAVN)

Vietnamese divisions were now converging on the Saigon area. As soon as 14 April, the ARVN intelligence detected the arrival of the first elements of the powerful 1st SAC in the area of Dong Xoai, some 65km northeast of Saigon. The next day, it was the turn of the 3rd SAC to arrive there, before driving towards Route 20 and Xuan Loc. After conquering Phan Thiet on 18 April, the coastal column (2nd SAC) was also fast approaching to reinforce the Xuan Loc front. On 19 April, seeing his efforts to retake Dau Giay had failed, Toan decided, in accord with the JGS, to pull out the 18th Division from Xuan Loc. He wanted to recover the unit to establish a new defensive line at Trang Bom, west of Bien Hoa, with the 3rd Armoured Brigade, the 1st Airborne Brigade, the 468th Marine Brigade, and the reconstituted 258th Marine Brigade.

During 11 days, the ARVN 18th Division and the 1st Airborne Brigade had stopped the attacks of three enemy divisions, inflicting on them over 5,000 casualties. At least 37 T-54 and Type 59 tanks lay destroyed inside the defensive perimeter. But now, they were facing six more divisions and two additional armoured brigades from the 2nd and 3rd SACs, which had just arrived and began to deploy against the northern and western perimeters. Despite the heroism of his men, Dao knew that he would soon be overwhelmed, and it was with relief that he received the order to pull out from the shattered city, hit by over 20,000 artillery shells. However, he knew by experience that a retreat was one of the most difficult manoeuvres for a besieged force. He bet that the North Vietnamese were expecting that he should attack west along Route 1, simultaneously with a push eastward by the 3rd Armoured Brigade that came to the rescue. Instead, he decided to take the Communists by surprise by planning to retreat at night south along Route 2, a stretch of 40km of plantation dirt trail through rubber trees. Dao sent an officer in his helicopter to study the road and determine if there were any Communist roadblocks. The officer reported back that the road was passable and appeared to be free of North Vietnamese troops. Although local Viet Cong guerrillas still harassed the road, Dao believed he could easily brush them aside.

With only half a day to detail a withdrawal plan, Dao decided on a deception strategy, ordering the 1st Airborne Brigade to mount a major attack against the PAVN 7th Division units east of Xuan Loc. The paratroopers, backed by a tremendous amount of artillery, fought all day on 20 April. They expanded the defensive perimeter near the airfield, allowing VNAF to drop supplies for the withdrawal. Meanwhile, in order to bolster the courage of his troops, Dao himself would walk out with them while his deputy, Colonel Ngo Ky Dung, would fly overhead in Dao's helicopter to provide command and control. The first unit to leave from Tan Phong at 8:00 p.m. would be the 48th Regiment, followed by the armour of the 5th ACS, and then the remaining artillery and logistic units. When the artillery reached the former American outpost at Long Giao, it would establish a firebase to support the retreat. Next would be the RF units and any civilians. The two battalions of the 43rd Regiment, and the 82nd Ranger Battalion would be the last in the column. Acting as rear guard were the 2nd Battalion, 52nd Regiment, and the 1st Airborne Brigade. During the night, the 2nd Battalion would abandon Thi Mountain and link up with the Airborne at Tan Phong Intersection. These units would both move at dawn on 21 April.

In spite of the tremendous difficulties in moving an entire division still engaged in fierce fighting, Dao and the ARVN 18th Division conducted a masterly retreat. When night fell and under a rainy sky,

This ARVN M48 tank was waiting for the end of a VNAF air strike before trying to punch through Route 1 at the Dau Giay Intersection. However, the 3rd Armoured Brigade was pulled back on 19 April after losing some 40 APCs and tanks. (Tran Van Minh Collection)

By 18 April, additional North Vietnamese troops reached the ARVN I Corps area and were pouring into the Xuan Loc sector. These Mazur 350 tracked artillery tractors of the 3rd SAC are deploying with their D-74 122mm guns in a rubber trees plantation northwest of Xuan Loc. (PAVN)

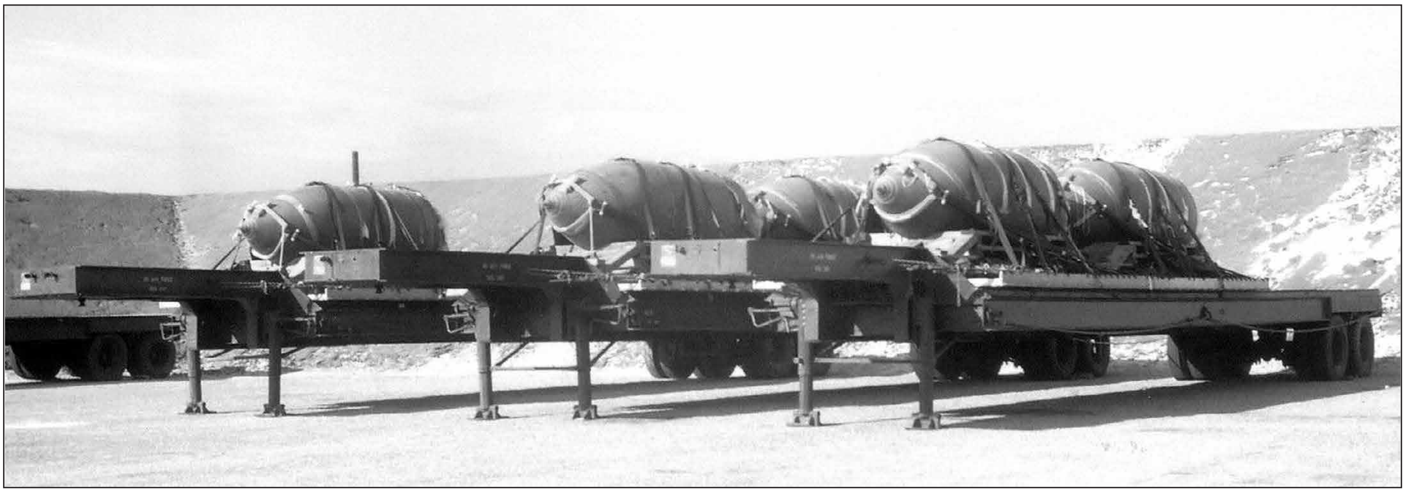
a first convoy of 200 trucks left Xuan Loc. The move took the North Vietnamese by surprise. That was in great part due to a lack of coordination between the 4th SAC and the 2nd SAC that had just been deploying and in charge of the sector. The coastal column did not have time to reconnoitre the area and to position blocking forces. Another factor of confusion was another BLU-82 "Daisy Cutter" strike by a VNAF C-130A against the PAVN 341st Division headquarters at Dinh Quan which an EC-47 ELINT aircraft had been able to pinpoint when the unit frantically tried to catch the retreating South Vietnamese. The PAVN radio station abruptly stopped transmitting when the command post was struck and wiped out. Another BLU-82 dropped at the Dau Giay Intersection roadblock led the North Vietnamese to believe that the 18th Division intended to pass over it and to link up with the 3rd Armoured Brigade. Indeed, the brigade played its part in the deception plan by renewing assaults against Hung Ngia.

The departing columns along Route 2 were joined by civilians of the Catholic villages of Bao Dinh, Bao Toan, and Bao Hoa. The different convoys moved by echelons, supported by VNAF strikes and artillery. By dawn, most of the troops arrived unscathed at their grouping point, under the protection of TF-315 of the 3rd Armoured Brigade which had been sent there to join them and escort them back towards Long Binh along Route 15.

However, if most of the Xuan Loc defenders evacuated the city without many problems, it was not the case for the rear guard. There had been confusion between Dao and the 1st Airborne Brigade's CO, Lieutenant Colonel Nguyen Van Dinh. Dao needed the 2nd Battalion to hold Thi Mountain to protect the northern side of the retreat, the battalion would then slowly withdraw and link up with the Airborne at Tan Phong but Colonel Dinh moved out and left the 2nd Battalion behind. Meanwhile, the 3rd Airborne Artillery Battalion, escorted by an airborne reconnaissance company, was the first element of the brigade to pull out, while the brigade's other combat battalions all walked through the rubber trees. The 3rd Airborne Artillery Battalion was ambushed by two Communist battalions at Suoi Ca, however, suffering heavy casualties. Dao immediately grabbed his helicopter and flew towards the Airborne positions to assist them and guide air strikes. As Dao was flying, the 43rd Regiment's CO called him on the radio and told him that his 2nd Battalion was still waiting at Tan Phong. Dao switched to the battalion frequency and told the men not to use Route 2 but cut through the jungle and bypass the PAVN positions. Major Nguyen Huu Che ordered his men to break out into small units. It took them three days to retreat through the jungle, fighting all the way. Their casualties were heavy, with over 50 percent of the battalion lost.

The North Vietnamese now organised the pursuit but was in part impeded by the fighting further north for the Dau Giay Intersection. The 3rd Armoured Brigade continued to push east along Route

Facing six more PAVN divisions and two additional armoured brigades from the 2nd and 3rd SACs by 18 April, the ARVN 18th Division was ordered to evacuate Xuan Loc. The breakout operation was heavily supported by VNAF, including C-130As used as bombers, like this Hercules of the 435th Transport Squadron of Tan Son Nhut AB. (Pham Quang Khiem)



The VNAF dropped some seven BLU-82 15,000 pound (6,800 kg) bombs from 21 to 24 April to help the ARVN 18th Division extricate from Xuan Loc. These giant bombs were dropped by the South Vietnamese C-130As. (USAF)

1, retaking Hung Ngia on 22 April and now was driving for Dau Giay but Colonel Khoi was ordered to stop since most of the 18th Division had reached the friendly lines. The fighting around Dau Giay had immobilised the PAVN 6th and 341st Divisions there, with only the 7th Division and elements of the 304th Division, 2nd SAC, trailing the withdrawing ARVN division.

A battalion of the 48th Regiment, in what could be considered as a sacrificial mission, was then ordered to act as a rear guard by holding them at a roadblock at Nui Thi Mountain. Supported by four 105mm and three 155mm howitzers, they pushed back a first North Vietnamese attack on the afternoon of 22 April and destroyed two T-54s. The unit was resupplied during the night by two CH-47As that brought in ammunition and rations. Just after their departure, the North Vietnamese again tried to scale the hill with waves of infantry and the fighting continued until dawn; the defenders being protected by two VNAF AC-119s. The battalion fought two more days with VNAF support, including the dropping of two more BLU-82s against important enemy convoys on 24 April, when the survivors finally broke out in small groups.

On 22 April, the ARVN 18th Division was repositioned near Trang Bom. The unit had suffered 30 percent casualties and its attached Regional Force and Popular Force units were virtually wiped out. The division spent three days preparing for the final defence of Saigon. On 23 April, Dao was promoted to major general for his stalwart service in Xuan Loc. What remained of the 1st Airborne Brigade was detached from Dao's division and ordered to defend Phuoc Tuy Province. On 25 April, the 3rd Armoured Brigade was ordered to pull back to Bien Hoa to tighten the defensive lines around Saigon, putting an end to the Xuan Loc battle. The VNAF flew 665 attack sorties during that last phase of the battle for the

On 21 April, the ARVN 18th Division would pass through the North Vietnamese lines, taking the enemy by surprise by driving down the unguarded Route 2. The first elements that reached the South Vietnamese lines were taken under command by TF-315 of the 3rd Armoured Brigade. (ARVN)

loss of 12 aircraft. Some seven BLU-82s were dropped from 21 to 24 April around Xuan Loc. But its operations from Bien Hoa became more and more difficult, with continuing artillery harassments and teams of PAVN SA-7 missile launchers lurking around the base and on 19 April an A-37B was shot down as soon as he took off.

At the conclusion of the Xuan Loc battle, the VNAF still possessed 169 A-37s and 109 F-5s. However, only 92 A-37s and 93 F-5s were operational. There were also around 35 A-1s available. With the Xuan Loc front crumbling, the North Vietnamese moved additional 122mm and 130mm guns and MRLs within range of the airbase. On 23 April, they opened fire, destroying six F-5s and 14 A-37s. It was time to evacuate Bien Hoa, the most important fighter base of the VNAF. The aircraft evacuation took place in good order, from 24 to 26 April, despite the shelling. The fixed-wing aircraft departed quickly in groups between two artillery bombardments for Tan Son Nhut and Binh Thuy, in the Mekong Delta. The aircraft took off from runways, taxiways or any stretch of flat concrete, tarmac, or even packed earth. Miraculously, only one A-1H crashed on take-off into a rice field, on 24 April, but his pilot survived, paid for a ride on a motorcycle, and joined his squadron the same afternoon at Tan Son Nhut!

5

THE HO CHI MINH CAMPAIGN

Under intense pressures, President Thieu resigned on the evening of 21 April, the day Xuan Loc was evacuated. In his farewell speech, he accused the Americans of betraying South Vietnam by not fulfilling their obligations of continuing to provide economic and military aid to his country. He also revealed that he was forced by Washington to sign the Paris Agreement under the threat of the termination of any US aid. He reluctantly only agreed when President Nixon personally promised him that if North Vietnam attacked, the United States would respond militarily. He would hand over power to Vice President Tran Van Huong, in charge, hopefully, to find a political solution to the crisis within the terms of the Paris Accords. Thieu left Saigon four days later for exile in Taiwan. Yet, although he had been reviled as the obstacle to peace by anti-war activists around the globe, his departure had no impact on Hanoi's military plans.

Health diminished, the 72-year-old new President disbanded the last cabinet nominated by Thieu and went on consulting the various political groups in order to form a new government able to open negotiations with the Communists. Maintained in their posts, until they would be replaced were the Minister of Defence, Lieutenant General Tran Van Dong, and the chairman of the Joint General Staff, Lieutenant General Cao Van Vien. But acting as if that the enemy was not at the gates of Saigon, Huong procrastinated, being in the meantime unable to convince the divided legal opposition to settle their differences. The French Ambassador Jean-Marie Mérillon was pushing for a quick nomination of what was presented as the leader of the Neutralist "Third Force", former General Duong Van Minh. With the support of the French Foreign Affairs Ministry, Mérillon believed that Minh could obtain a ceasefire from Hanoi, sparing Saigon from the horrors of a long siege. He hoped that Minh would lead a National Reconciliation Council for two to three weeks, opening the way for a coalition government with the PRG. Official contacts seemed to confirm that China backed that solution, but Moscow rejected the idea and left the decision to Hanoi. The PRG then issued a statement that "a new government must be formed in Saigon, and this new government must not include any of the Thieu clique". Mérillon still stuck to the fiction that the Viet Cong-PRG was a different entity from the North Vietnamese Government. His colleague in Hanoi, Ambassador Philippe Richer, disagreed both with Paris and Mérillon. He warned them to have no illusions about the Communists, who were "true Stalinists". For him, it would be difficult to believe that they would share power and would accept that the important, 12,000 strong, French expatriate community would remain in a "Neutralist South Vietnam". Mérillon took no dispositions to evacuate them, convinced that their presence would give to the Communists a pledge of the seriousness of his proposal. In fact, both Giap and Le Duan had no reason to stop their offensive while they were on the verge of capturing Saigon. On this point, they agreed with the decision of the new President Huong to continue fighting, as he ordered the military to defend the nation's capital. The battle for the ultimate prize, Saigon, was about to begin.

On 14 April, Dung received instruction from the Politburo that "we must be in Saigon to celebrate Ho Chi Minh's Birthday", fixing as a deadline the date of 19 May. Another concern was the arrival of the rainy season after that date that would complicate mechanised operations. Unanimously, Hanoi's leadership adopted the name of Ho Chi Minh for the coming campaign.

Meanwhile, the defence of the Saigon area rested on the shoulders of the CO of the III Corps, Lieutenant General Nguyen Van Toan. As usually, the JGS could not offer much help, being from the onset more an administrative body rather than a real general headquarters. Toan organised his depleted forces on his own according to the following deployments with five centres of resistance for the defence of the city. These fronts were so connected as to form an arc enveloping the area west, north, and east of the capital. He favoured aggressive counterattacks against enemy penetrations in order to put the city out of range of the dreaded North Vietnamese 130mm guns. The Bien Hoa Front to the northeast was defended by the 18th Division regrouped at Trang Bom, replacing there the 3rd Armoured Brigade, called back towards Bien Hoa to act as a reserve. The 18th Division was backed by the intact 468th Marine Brigade and the reconstituted 258th Marine Brigade. The 258th held a line running down from the Dong Nai River through the town of Ho Nai on Route 1, with the 468th from there south to Route 15. Marine Division CO, Major General Bui The Lan, ordered his deputy, Colonel Nguyen Thanh Tri, to command the two brigades while he remained at the port of Vung Tau to reconstitute the rest of the division.

The 1st Airborne Brigade, after retreating from Xuan Loc, remained in Phuoc Tuy Province to shield Vung Tau. The brigade, with the local RF, had to defend a huge swath of territory and two major roads: Route 2 coming from Xuan Loc and Route 15 from Saigon. The brigade was placed under the command of Major General Nguyen Duy Hinh, who was in charge of the Phuoc Tuy – Vung Tau Front. Hinh had only the Airborne Brigade, the 14th Marine Battalion holding Vung Tau, local RF/PF, plus the remnants of his own 3rd Division and bits and pieces of various units continuing to stream in from I and II Corps.

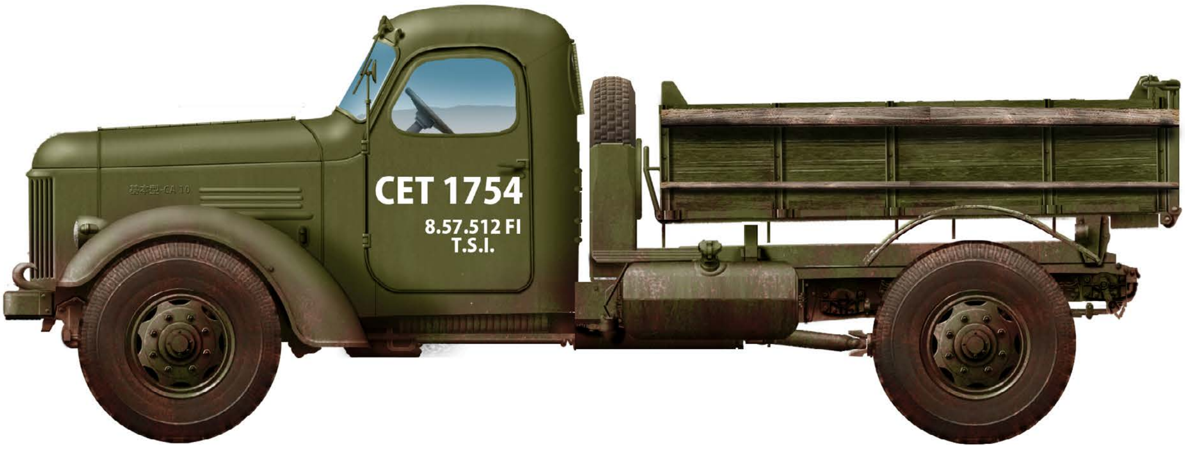
The still intact 5th Division guarded the northern approaches to Saigon along Route 13, particularly between the Dong Nai and Saigon Rivers. On the Cu Chi Front, on the western side of Saigon, the 25th Division had its regiments scattered on a line from Tay Ninh to Cu Chi on Route 1, along with the 32nd Ranger Group. Between the 25th Division and Tan Son Nhut AB was the recently formed 9th Ranger Group, an untested unit.

South of the 25th Division was the Hau Nghia Province RF/PF. Behind them on Saigon's western outskirts was another recently formed 8th Ranger Group, along with remnants of the 7th Ranger Group. South of Saigon, the rebuilding 22nd Division, assisted by the badly understrength 6th Ranger Group, was ordered to hold open Route 4 from Ben Luc to My Tho. These understrength units received a critical mission. If Saigon fell, ARVN had developed preliminary plans to retreat into the Mekong Delta and move the government to Can Tho. They would then blow up the Ben Luc Bridge over the Vam Co Dong River to block PAVN armour. Toan's last units, the 4th Airborne Brigade and recuperating elements of the other Airborne brigades, held defensive positions closer to the city. The elite 81st Airborne Ranger Group and a few Special Forces teams recovered from I Corps were guarding various installations. The Navy would try to interdict the canals and rivers, while the VNAF still flew from Bien Hoa, Tan Son Nhut and Binh Thuy airbases. To hold Saigon, the South Vietnamese had roughly 60,000 regular troops, 40,000 RF plus another 20,000 PF militias, and 5,000 police, totalling 125,000 men. They were supported by 407 artillery pieces, 50 M48s, 100 M41s, and more than 470 M113s, M42s and V100s.

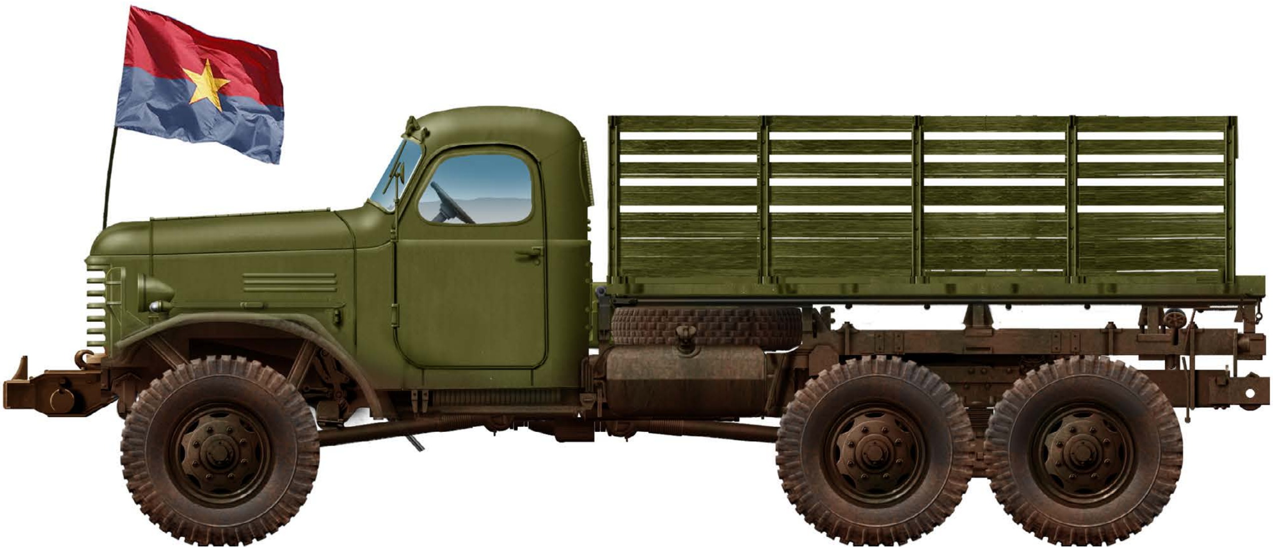
Senior General Van Tieng Dung, PAVN C-in-C, had already worked on the plans for the final thrust against Saigon, with the help of the planners of the Central Cell of the CMC under Senior General Vo Nguyen Giap, as well as by reviewing the "five prongs" strategy of the B2 Front's CO, Lieutenant General Tran Van Tra. He wanted to crumble the enemy resistance, with attacks to make its organisation dissolve and its morale collapse. Rather than focusing on killing a percentage of the South Vietnamese army, as during the battle of Xuan Loc, this time Dung would aim directly at the enemy's heart and brain. He selected five key objectives that would ensure the collapse of the South Vietnamese military and government. They were the Joint General Staff Headquarters, Tan Son Nhut AB, the Presidential Palace, the National Police Headquarters, and the Capital Military Zone Headquarters. To achieve this collapse, Dung decided to use whatever forces were necessary from each direction to encircle enemy forces, isolating them and preventing them from falling back into Saigon. The purpose was to pin down in place the ARVN divisions in their centres of resistance, allowing powerful mechanised "penetration groups" to advance rapidly along the main roads and strike directly at the five chosen objectives. This was the exact opposite of the strategy used to conquer Ban Me Thuot, and highlighted PAVN's newfound flexibility.

To accomplish this strategy, Dung had amassed at the gates of Saigon five army Corps comprising 15 divisions, and another 10 independent regiments, not counting the various B2 Front sapper units. In case of necessity, Dung could also engage the 324th Division, retained in the area of Da Nang, the 2nd Division and the 52nd Brigade at Tam Ky and the 968th Division at Nha Trang, for mopping up operations.

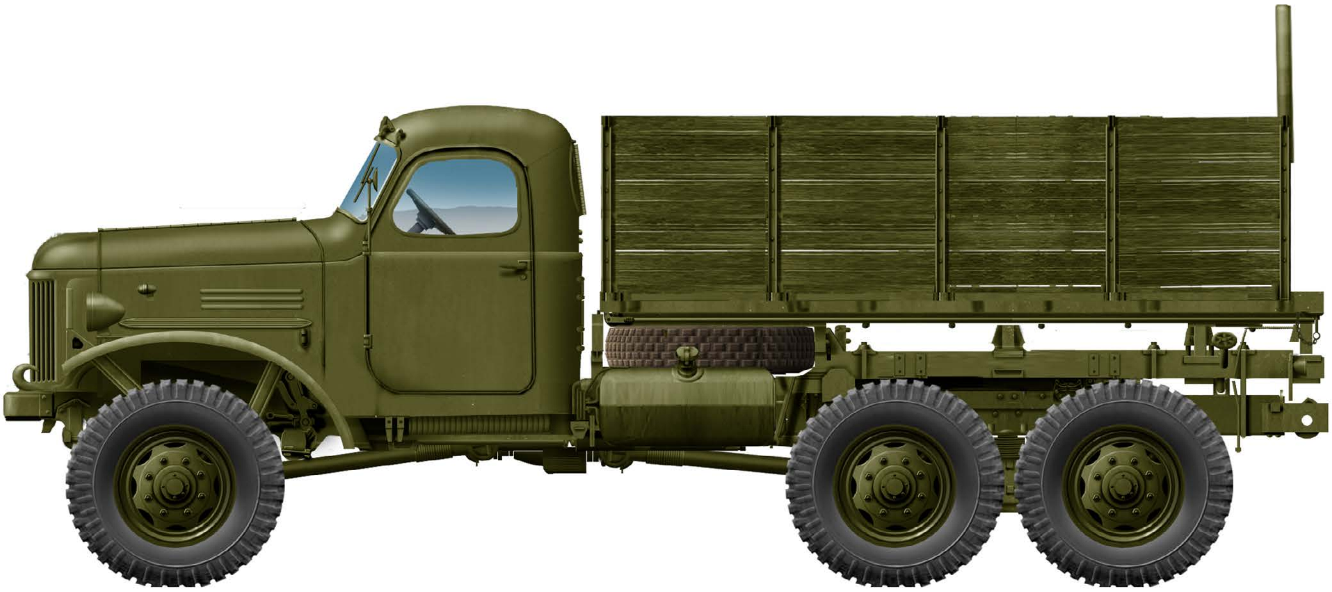
Dung also wanted the greatest air defence possible to shield his forces as well as their logistic lines of communications. In fact, the greatest part of the massive North Vietnamese air defence system, excepting two anti-aircraft artillery divisions left to protect the homeland, was sent to the South. Dung also ordered that these units should be prepared to engage US aircraft if the Americans decided to reintervene, for example, protecting their air evacuation operations. From the strategic reserve, the 375th Anti-Aircraft Artillery Division was deployed to defend Hue and Da Nang. Its 263rd SAM Regiment sent one battalion of SA-2s to the northern approaches of Saigon. The 365th Anti-Aircraft Artillery Division sent one regiment to protect Dalat, another to defend Cam Ranh, and the third, with an SA-2 regiment to defend Nha Trang. The remaining air defence units were assigned to the five Corps. The 673rd Anti-Aircraft Artillery Division protected the 2nd SAC. The brigade-sized 71st Anti-Aircraft Artillery Regiment, with one regiment and six separate battalions of AA guns, was attached to the 4th SAC. The 77th Anti-Aircraft Artillery Division with one regiment and six battalions of AA guns and one SA-7 battalion, defended Group 232. Five anti-aircraft artillery regiments shielded the 3rd SAC. The powerful 1st SAC was protected by the 367th Anti-



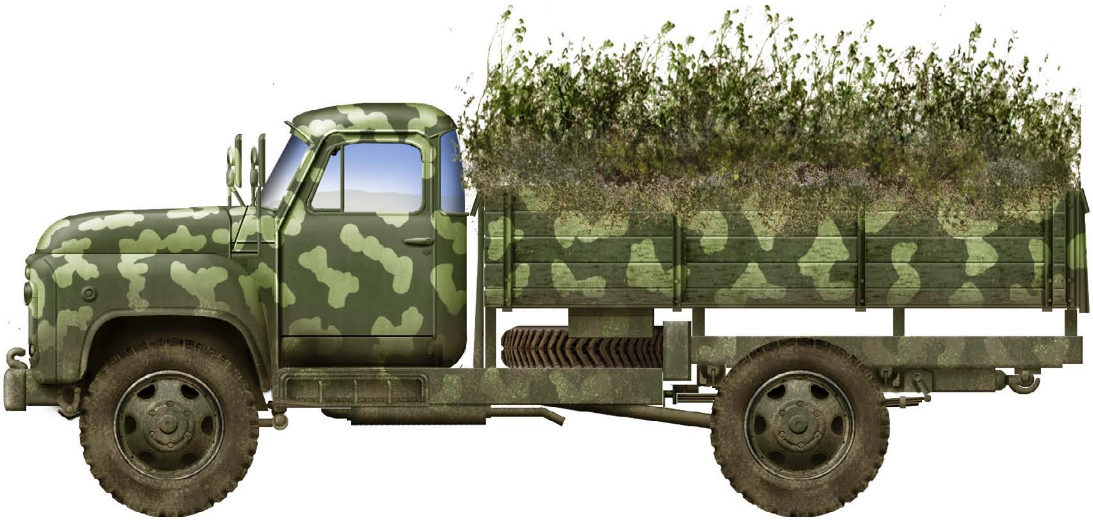
A Chinese-built Jiefang CA-10 (4x2) 4,000kg truck, the Chinese version of the Soviet ZIL-150, of the PAVN 304th Division as seen on Route 15 in April 1975. At that last stage of the conflict, most North Vietnamese divisions were motorised units, with their own transportation units. (Artwork by David Bocquelet)



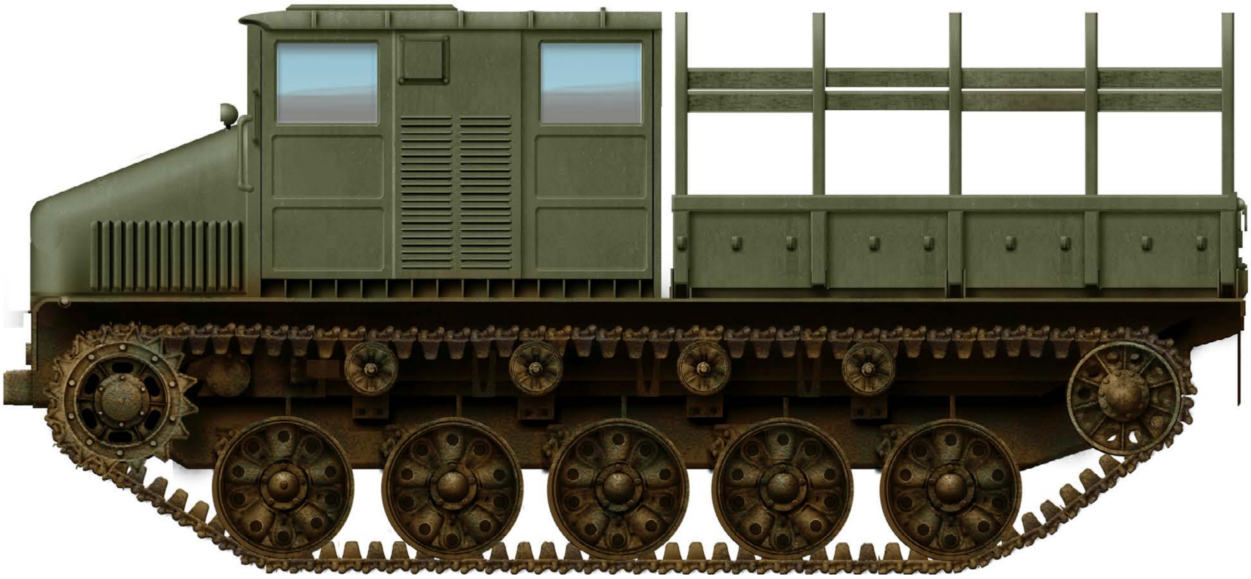
A Chinese-built Jiefang CA-30 "Liberation" (6x6) 4,500kg truck, the Chinese version of the Soviet ZIL-157, belonging to the PAVN 325th Division, April 1975. The vehicle was highly appreciated for its good cross-country capabilities. (Artwork by David Bocquelet)



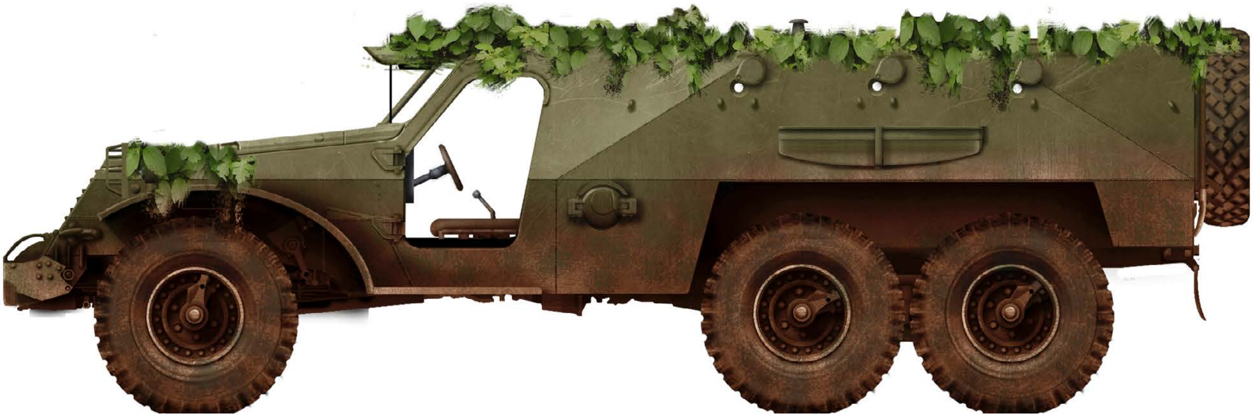
A Soviet-built ZIL-157 (6x6) 4,500kg truck of the PAVN 325th Division, 30 April 1975. The unit was part of the 2nd SAC "penetration group" with orders to take the South Vietnamese Presidential Palace. (Artwork by David Bocquelet)



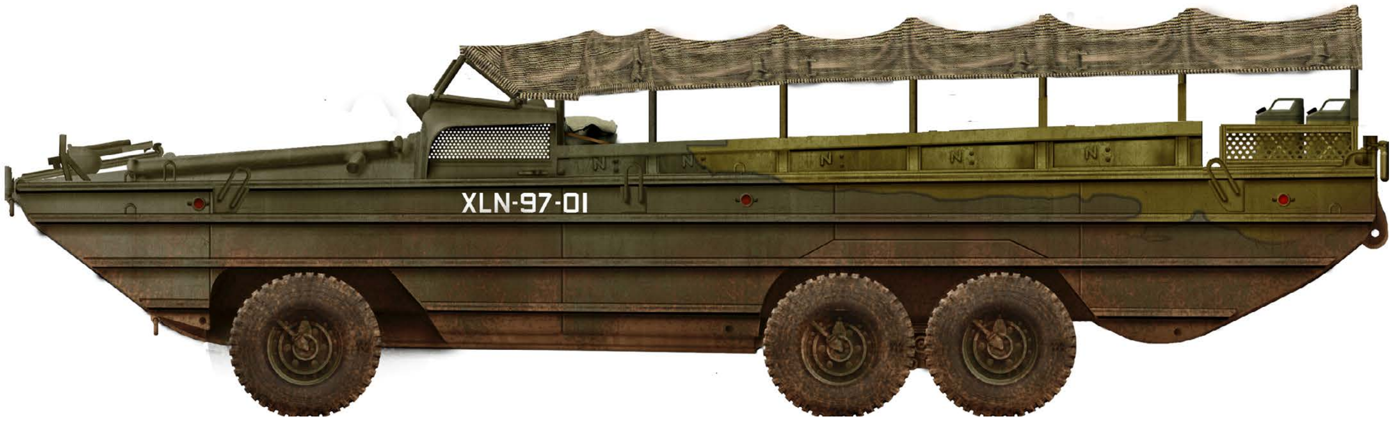
A Soviet-built GAZ-53 (4x2) 2,500kg truck of the PAVN Logistic Army 559, April 1975, with camouflage pattern in two different tones of green. (Artwork by David Bocquelet)



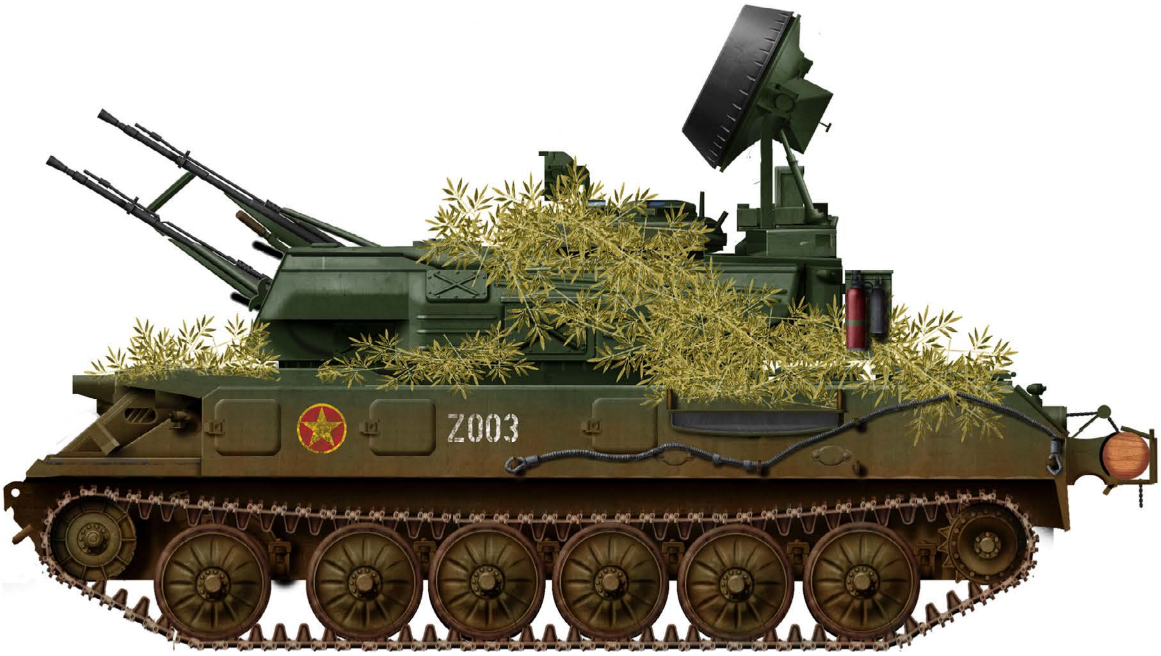
A Mazur D-350 tracked artillery tractor of the PAVN 675th Artillery Regiment of the 3 SAC, Dau Tieng April 1975. The Polish-built tractor was used in addition to Soviet-built ATS-59 and ATT-T tracked tractors to tow heavy artillery pieces. (Artwork by David Bocquelet)



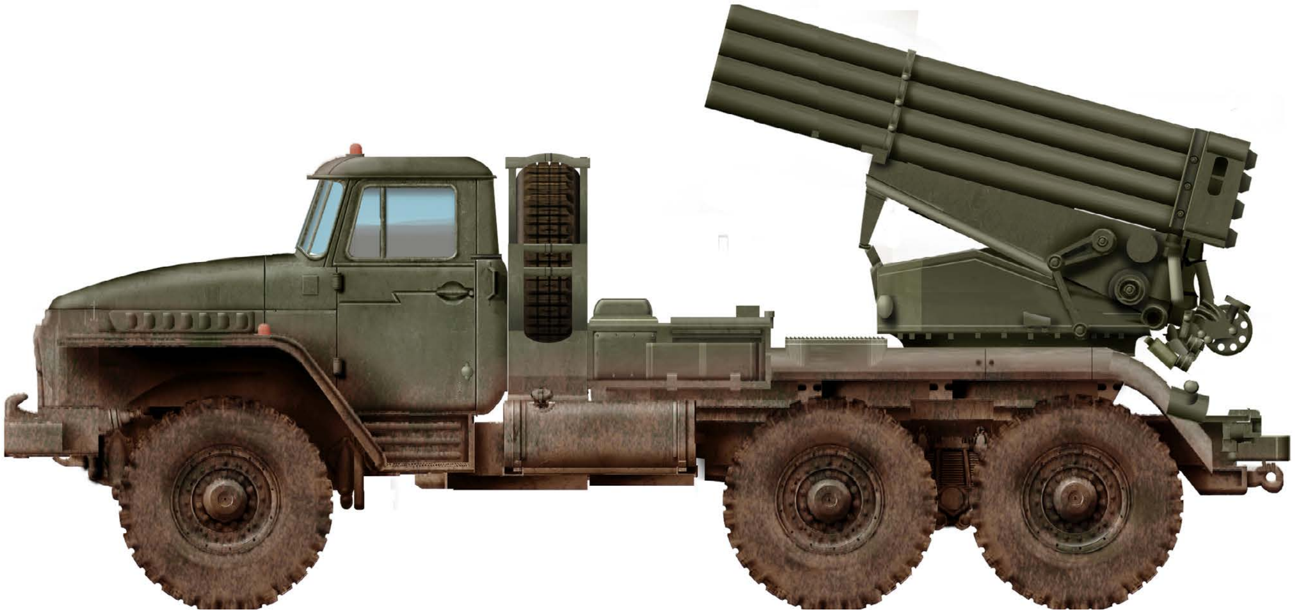
A PAVN BTR-152 APC of the 26th Armoured Group, B-2 Front. It was attached to the 341st Division during the fierce fighting at Xuan Loc in April 1975. (Artwork by David Bocquelet)



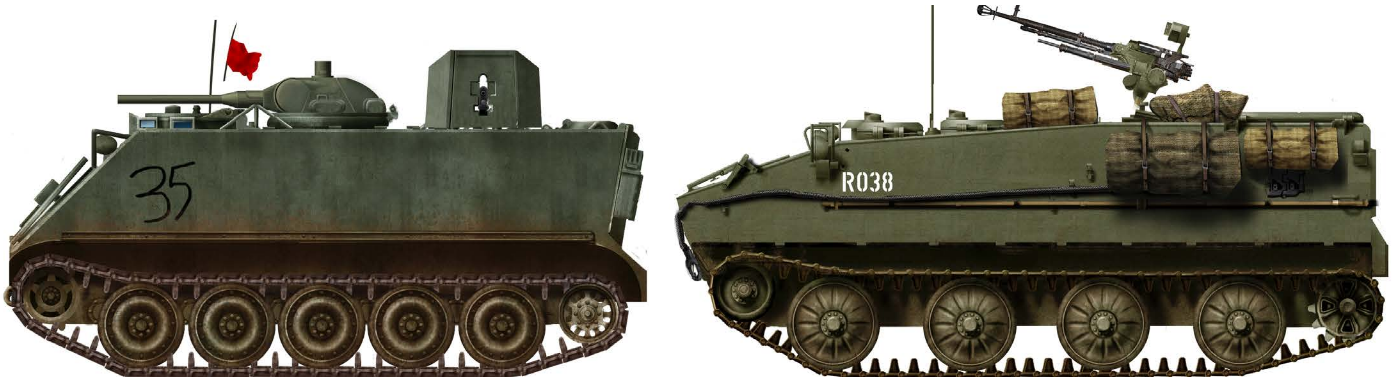
A Soviet-built BAV-485 amphibious truck of the PAVN 9th Division, Group 232, Vam Co Dong River sector, 28 April 1975. Based on the concept of the American DUKW, the Soviet vehicle was based on the ZIL-157 truck chassis. (Artwork by David Bocquelet)



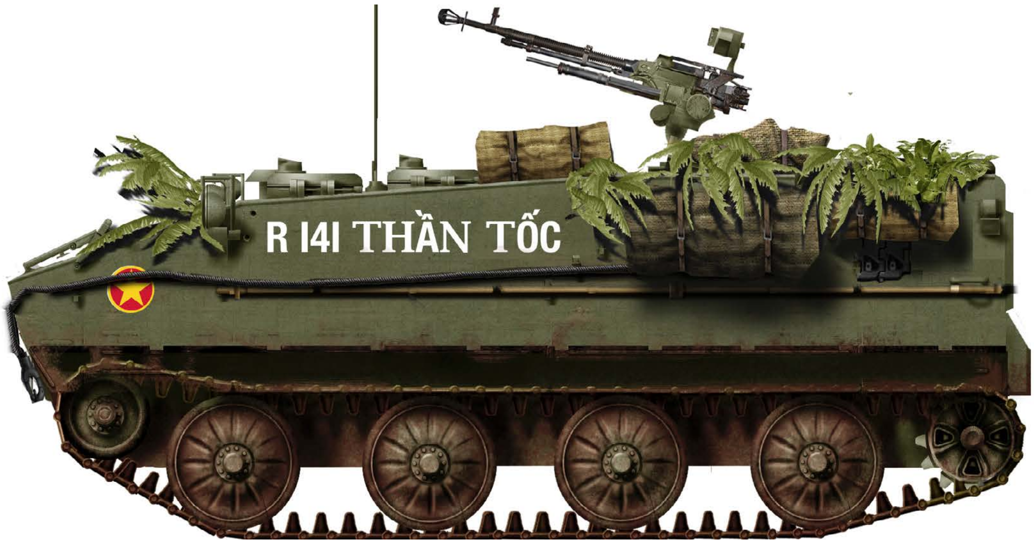
A ZSU-23-4 Shilka of the PAVN 237th Anti-Aircraft Artillery Regiment, April 1975. This very effective self-propelled radar-directed anti-aircraft weapon system participated in the last phase of the Saigon battle. (Artwork by David Bocquelet)



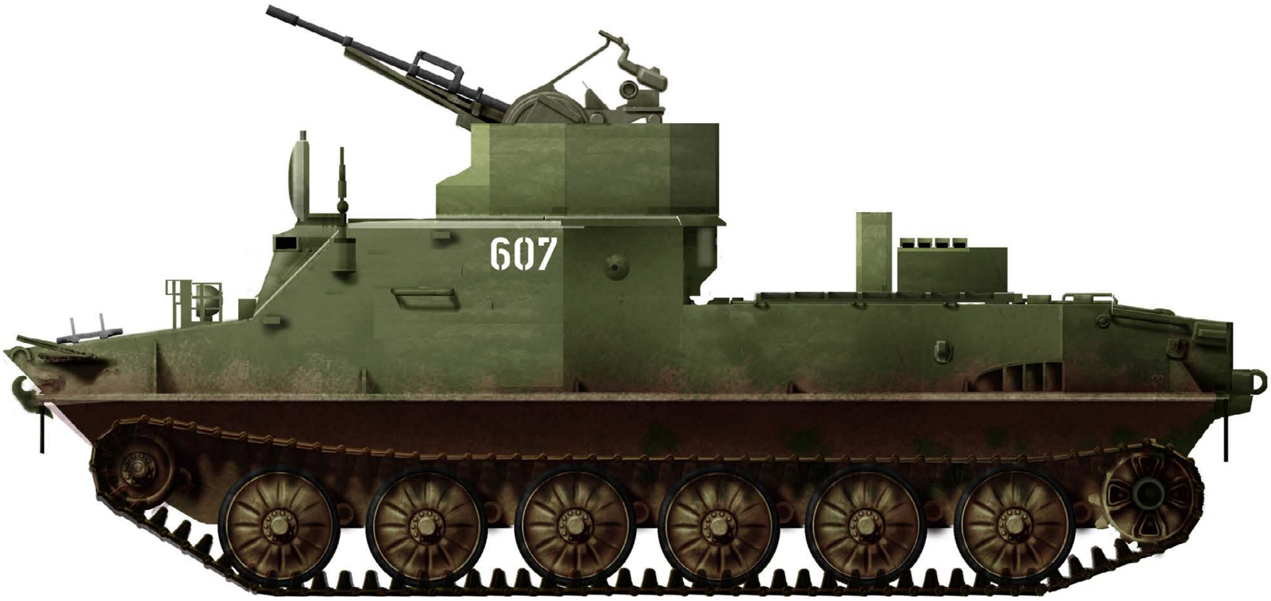
A BM-21 Grad of the PAVN 45th Artillery Brigade, 1st SAC, April 1975. The North Vietnamese introduced this new Soviet-built Multiple Rocket Launcher system into service in 1974. (Artwork by David Bocquelet)



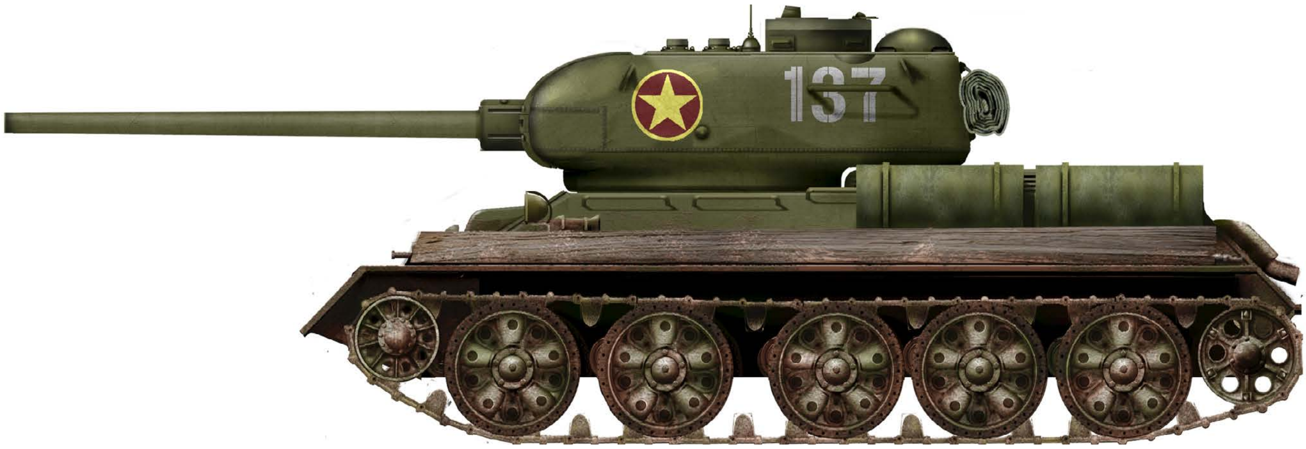
Always lacking in APCs, the PAVN 203rd Armoured Brigade, 2nd SAC, pressed into service every captured ARVN vehicle. This M132 flamethrower variant of the ubiquitous M113 was operated alongside a Chinese-built K-63 APC. (Artwork by David Bocquelet)



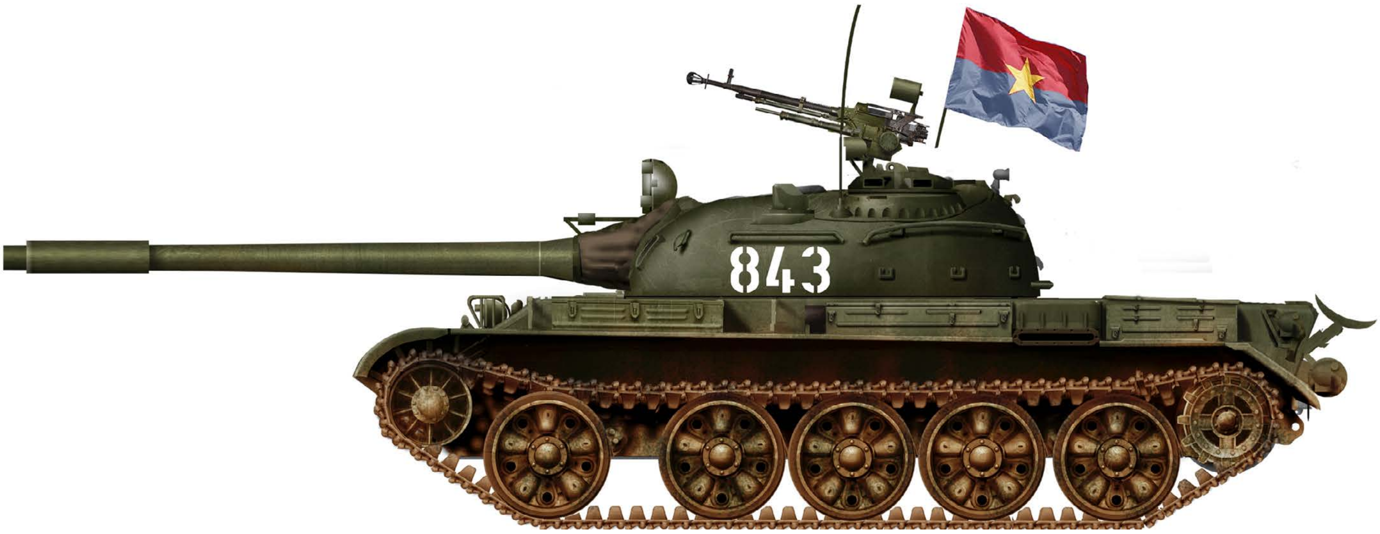
A Chinese-built K-63 APC of the PAVN 202nd Armoured Brigade, 1st SAC, April 1975. The unit was redeployed from North Vietnam to the gates of Saigon, covering nearly 2,000km in two short weeks. The name painted on the side of the vehicle means "divine speed". (Artwork by David Bocquelet)



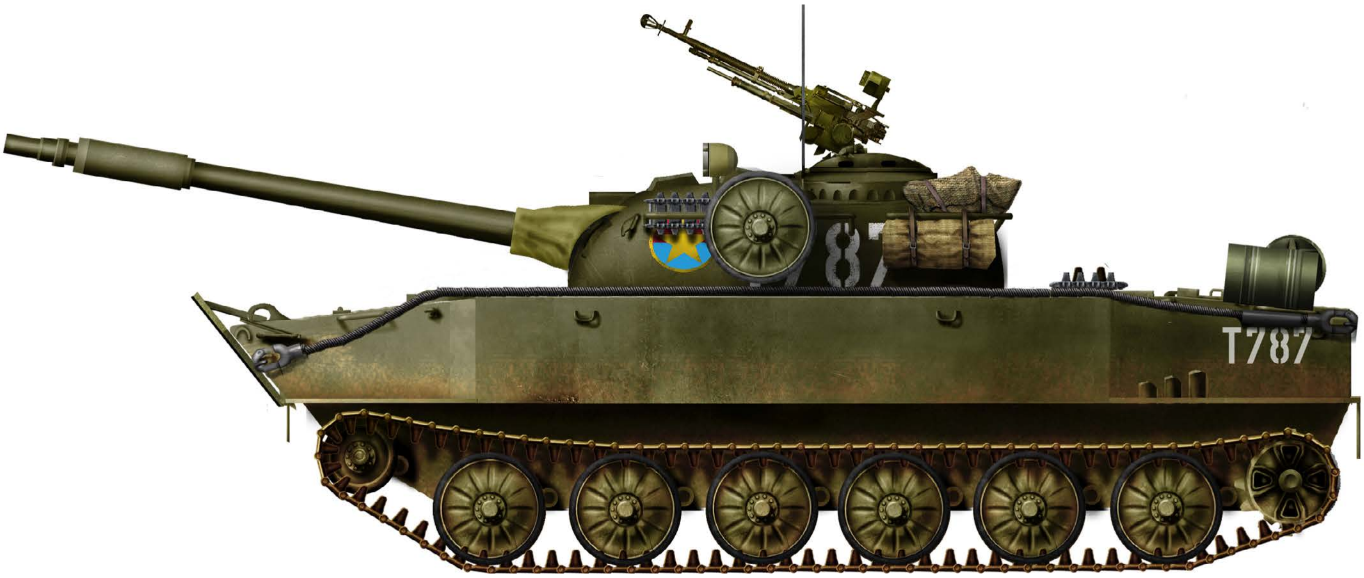
A BTR-50 APC of the PAVN 26th Armoured Group, Group 232, Loc Giang River, 28 April 1975. As with most BTR-50s then in service, this vehicle was modified with an extra turret containing a ZU-23-2 twin 23mm AA gun. (Artwork by David Bocquelet)



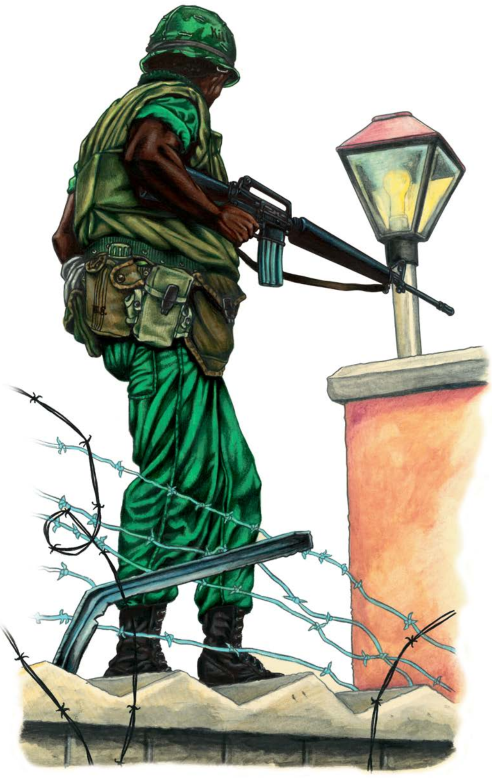
A T-34/85 tank of the PAVN 574th Armoured Regiment, 2nd SAC, April 1975. Initially operating in the southern sector of Da Nang, the unit was reorganised within the "coastal column" and moved down south for the final assault against Saigon. (Artwork by David Bocquelet)



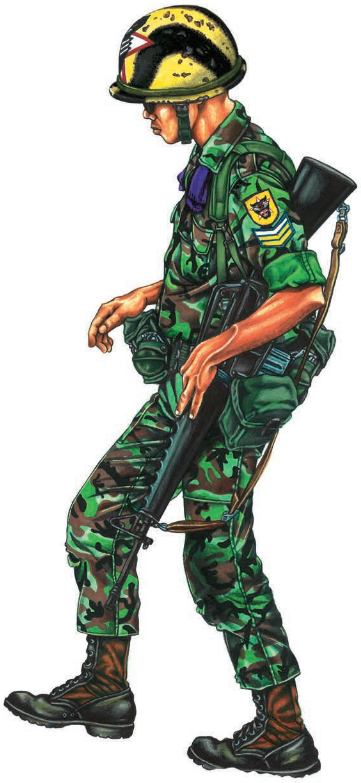
The first North Vietnamese tank to enter the South Vietnamese Presidential Palace was this T-54B of the 4th Company, 4th Battalion, PAVN 203rd Armoured Brigade, 2nd SAC, 30 April 1975. It symbolised the defeat of South Vietnam and is displayed at the entry of the former palace now turned into the Reunification Museum. (Artwork by David Bocquelet)



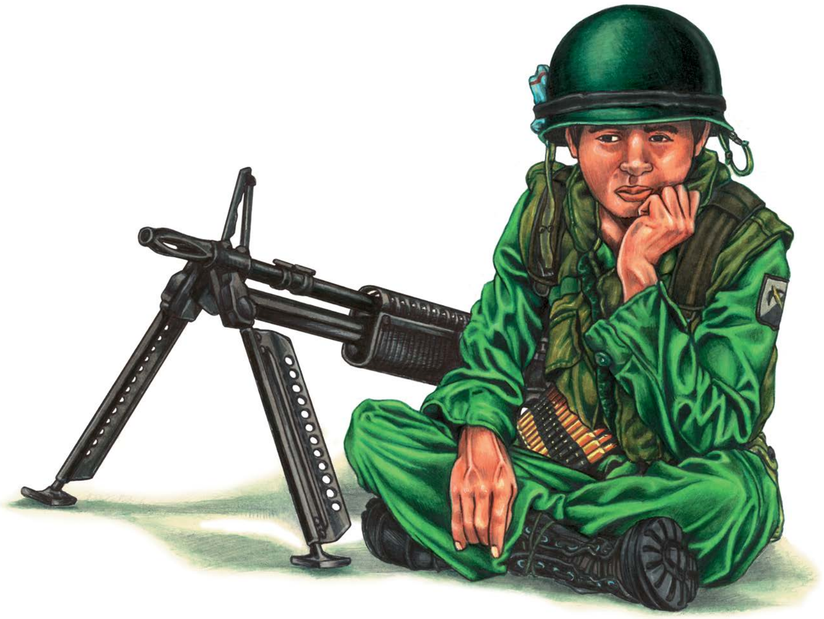
A Type 63 light tank of the PAVN 26th Armoured Group, Saigon 30 April 1975. This vehicle, as with most of the amphibious tanks, was assigned to the Army Corps-sized Group 232 that was in charge of the Saigon south-western front. (Artwork by David Bocquelet)



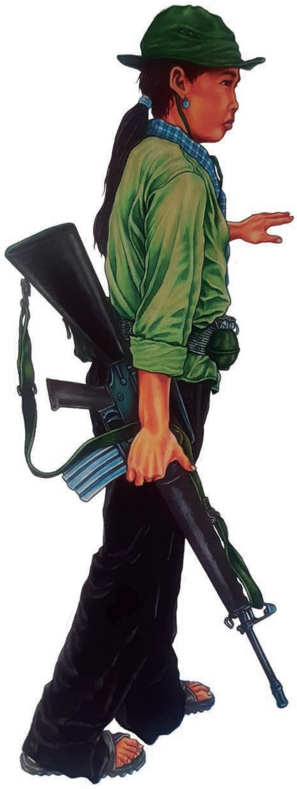
This US Marine from the 9th Amphibious Brigade is shown as seen while on duty with the Security Detachment at the US Embassy in Saigon on 29–30 April 1975. Like other guards, he wears the OG107 uniform with black leather boots, rather than the usual Jungle Boots worn by Marines in the field. Otherwise, his combat gear is quite complete and includes several items from the ALICE system, including the M55 Flak Jacket and M1 helmet with camouflage cover. His M16A1 is equipped with a 30-round magazine. (Artwork by Anderson Subtil)



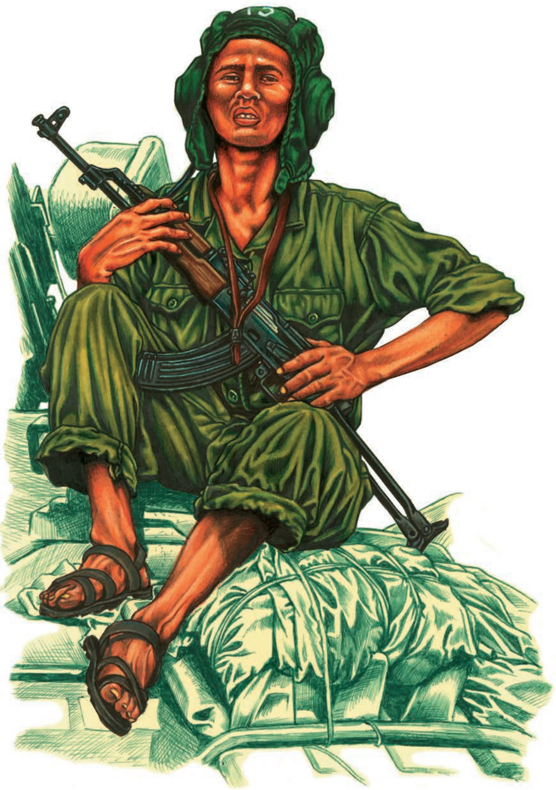
This Corporal 1st Class is a Ranger of the 32nd Ranger Group, seen in the An Loc area in March 1975. He wore fatigues in the BDQ camouflage pattern, primarily distributed to elite ARVN units, such as Rangers, paratroopers, and Special Forces. On his sleeve is the characteristic Ranger patch, and the white-over-yellow rank chevron. His M1 steel helmet is decorated with black and yellow stripes and South Vietnamese Ranger motifs, while on his body he wears the M1956 web gear. His outfit is completed by Jungle Boots. By this time, ARVN troops had already swapped their antiquated infantry weapons and were equipped with the latest from the US arsenals, including the M16A1 rifle shown here. (Artwork by Anderson Subtil)



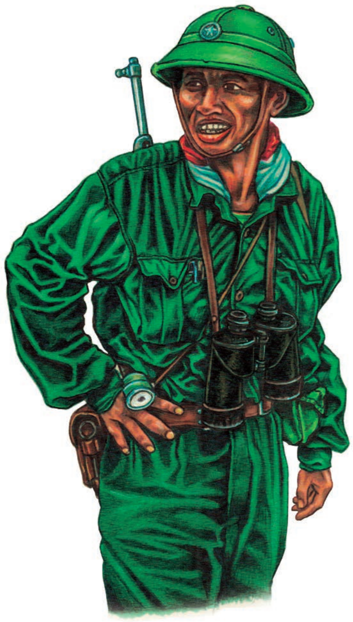
This Private from the 43rd Regiment, 18th Division, is shown as photographed in the Xan Loc area, in April 1975, wearing well-fitting copies of the US Army's OG107 fatigues and M56 gear, as provided to the ARVN during the process of 'Vietnamisation', implemented from 1970 onwards. Some units received M1951 Field Jackets at the time. Notable is the packet of Vietnamese 'J Bastos' cigarettes attached to the side of his M1 helmet. His personal weapon is the powerful 7.62mm calibre M60 machine gun. (Artwork by Anderson Subtil)



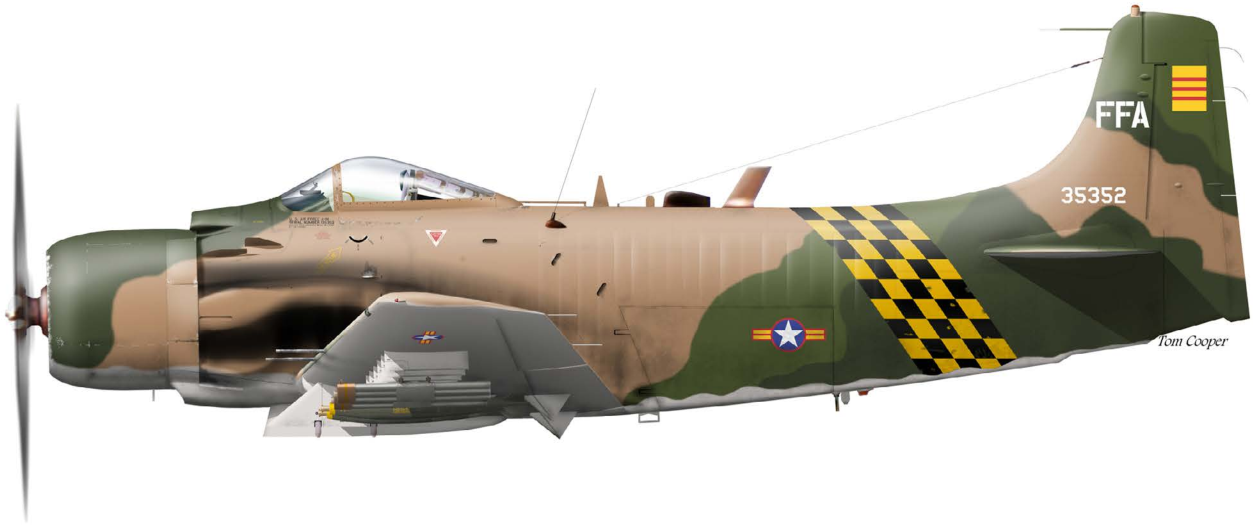
This female member of the Viet Cong is shown wearing a mixture of traditional dress and ARVN/US Army items. The essence of her clothing was the omnipresent Vietnamese 'pyjama', consisting of collarless green shirt and black trousers, completed by 'Ho Chi Minh' sandals made of truck tyres. The Jungle Hat is a model used by the ARVN and her belt is a US-made M56, completed by a magazine pouch from the ALICE system, and hand grenades. (Artwork by Anderson Subtil)



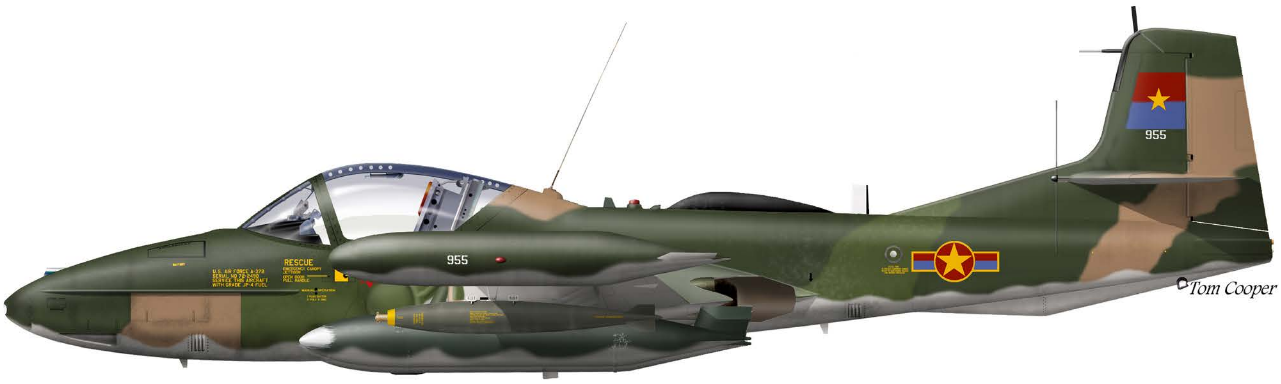
This tank-crewman from the 203rd Armoured Brigade, 7th Armoured Division, PAVN, is shown as photographed in Saigon on 30 April 1975. He is shown wearing the standard PAVN uniform, consisting of medium-green cotton shirt and trousers, in addition to the famous Ho Chi Minh sandals. The only specialised item of his attire is the padded AFV-crew helmet of Soviet origin, and the Chinese version of the AKMS assault rifle. (Artwork by Anderson Subtil)



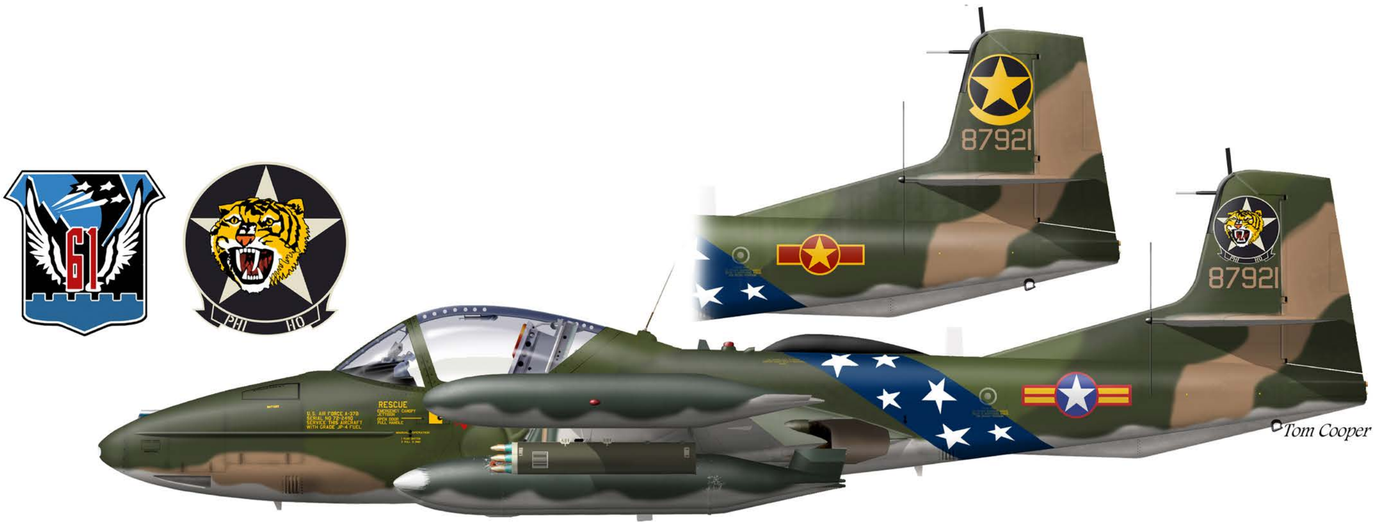
This regular officer of the 10th Division, PAVN, is shown as seen in late April 1975, wearing the same basic uniform as all infantrymen with no insignia or special markings. The only way to recognise him as an officer is the Chinese copy of the Tokarev pistol, and US-made M17 binoculars. His weapon is a K-50M sub machine gun, essentially a North Vietnamese variant of the Soviet PPSh-1, with improvements based on experience with from fighting the French and their MAT-49 SMG. (Artwork by Anderson Subtil)



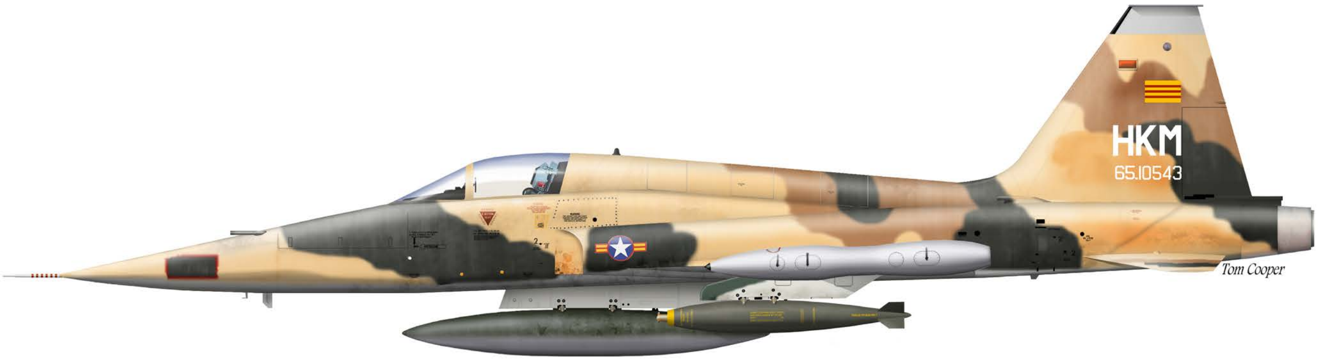
A VNAF A-1H of the 514th Fighter Squadron, 23rd Wing at Bien Hoa AB in 1975. Disbanded for budgetary reasons in October 1974, the two Skyraider-equipped units were re-activated in January 1975 to bolster the VNAF. Both were intensively engaged in operations against the North Vietnamese forces closing on Saigon. This particular aircraft (coded FFA, BuNo 135362) was evacuated to Thailand. It is shown armed with Mk.81 bombs and SUU-14 submunition dispensers, as was often the case during the last drama of South Vietnam. (Artwork by Tom Cooper)



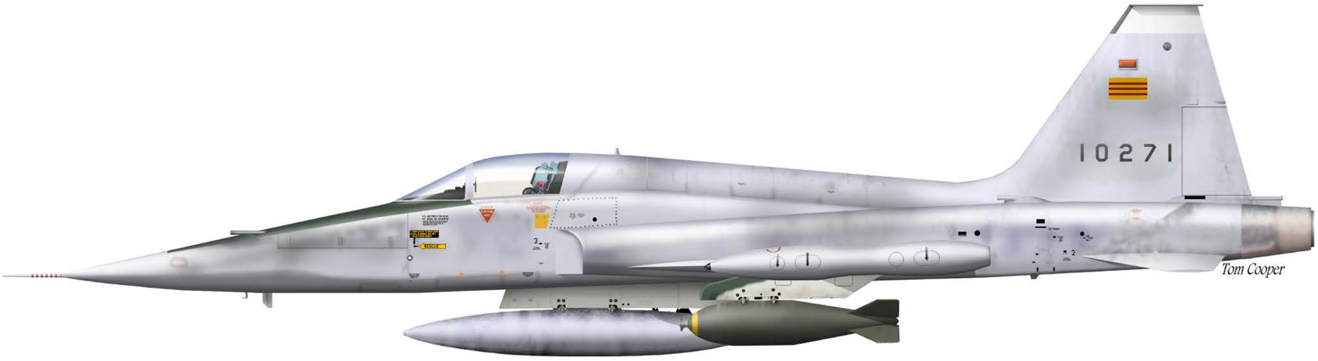
This was one of the five North Vietnamese A-37Bs that participated in the strike against Tan Son Nhut AB on 28 April 1975. For propaganda purposes, all the Dragonflies in question were painted with Provisional Revolutionary Government – National Liberation Front (Vietcong) markings. Each aircraft carried four external fuel tanks as well as four Mk-82 500lb bombs for that historic mission. (Artwork by Tom Cooper)



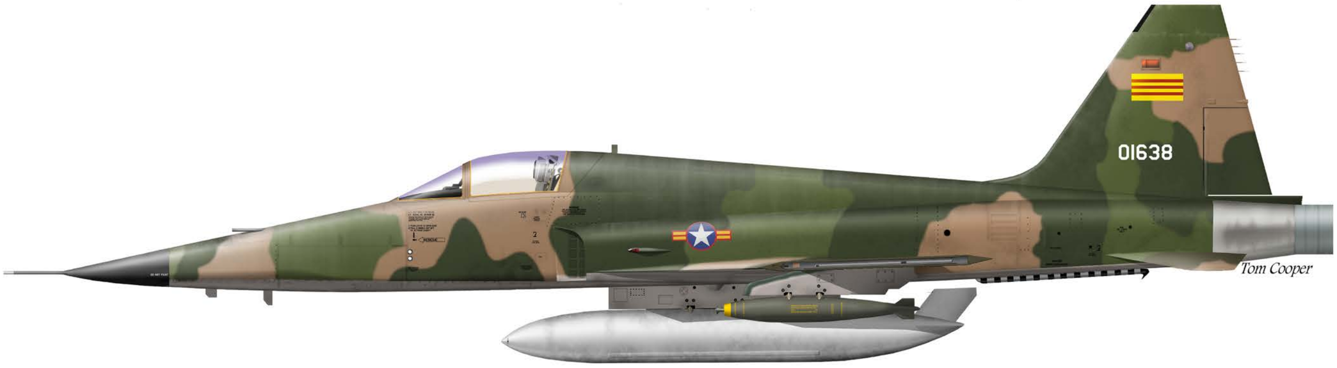
This VNAF A-37B of the 516th Fighter Squadron, 61st Wing, was one of the 29 A-37Bs captured at Da Nang on 29 March 1975. Not all of them were in operational condition but the North Vietnamese tried to make some of them operational again. The refurbished airframes had their South Vietnamese markings (main artwork) crudely overpainted and partially replaced by those of the VPAF (shown in the inset). In this case, the squadron patch on the fin was overpainted in yellow, and the VNAF roundel replaced by that of the North Vietnamese Air Force. (Artwork by Tom Cooper)



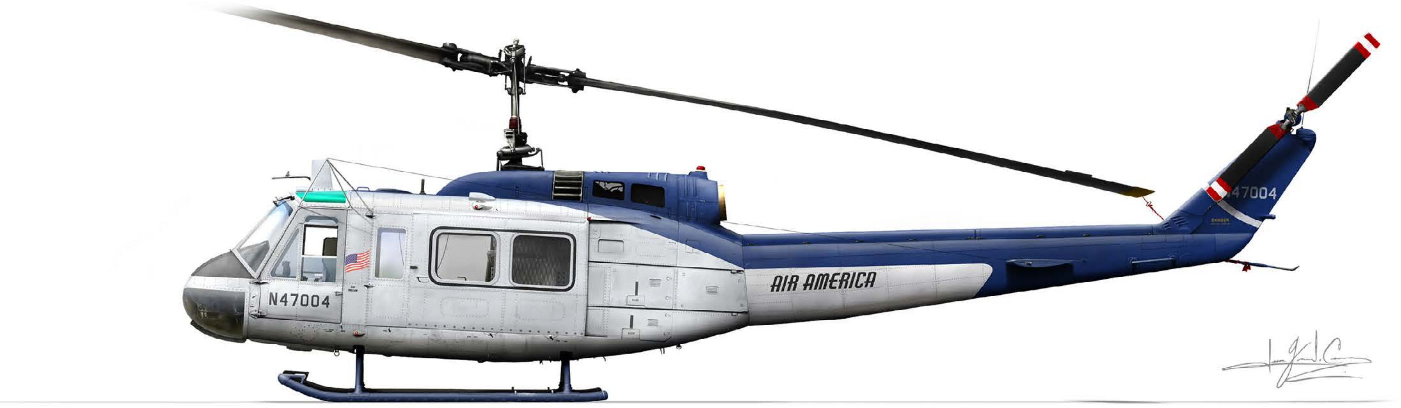
This F-5A of the 544th Fighter Squadron, 63rd Wing, VNAF, was captured by the North Vietnamese at Binh Thuy AB on 30 April 1975. Although that unit had meanwhile converted to the new F-5E Tiger IIs, it still operated a handful of older F-5As – including examples originally leased to the Imperial Iranian Air Force and then handed over to South Vietnam in the course of Operations Enhance and Enhance Plus in 1973–1974. Unlike many others, this jet retained its 'desert' camouflage colours. After the closure of Bien Hoa AB, after being hit by enemy artillery fire, the 544th Fighter Squadron evacuated to auxiliary airstrips in the Mekong Delta. (Artwork by Tom Cooper)



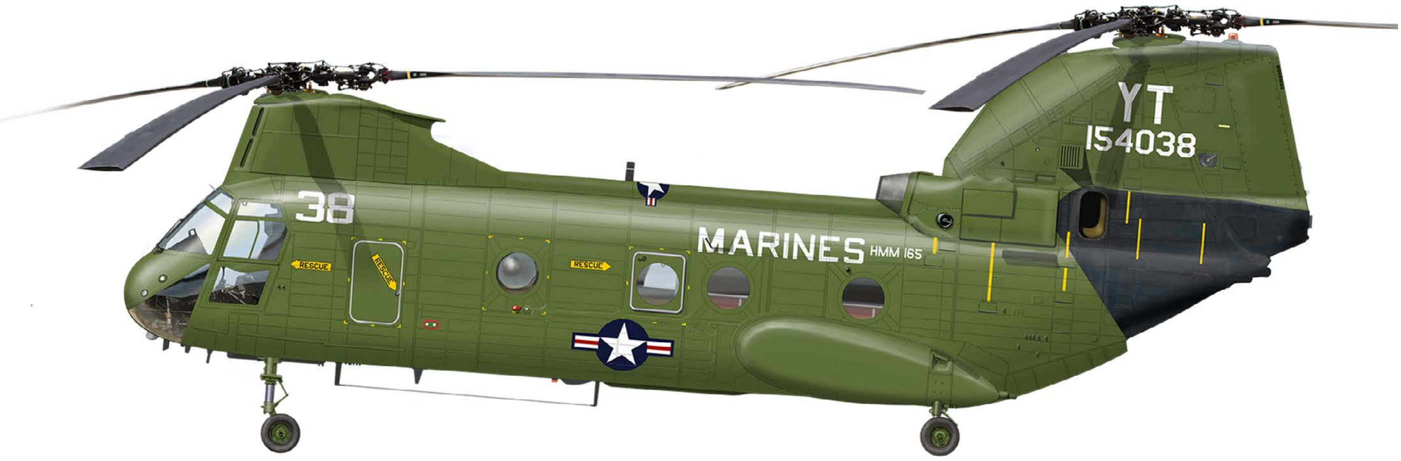
This F-5A of the 540th Fighter Squadron, 63rd Wing, VNAF, was captured by the North Vietnamese at Tan Son Nhut AB on 30 April 1975. The unit was actually home-based at Bien Hoa AB but had to redeploy as the base came under North Vietnamese artillery fire. Its pilots and ground personnel continued flying and fighting to the last moment, as clear from the fact that this jet was captured with M117 375lbs (170kg) bombs attached to its hardpoints, ready for the next sortie. The serial is something of a mystery: No F-5s with a serial containing 271 as the last three digits are known to have been manufactured in 1963, 1964, 1965 or 1966, while the Foreign Military Sales order including serials 67-21249 to 67-21271 was, reportedly, cancelled. (Artwork by Tom Cooper)



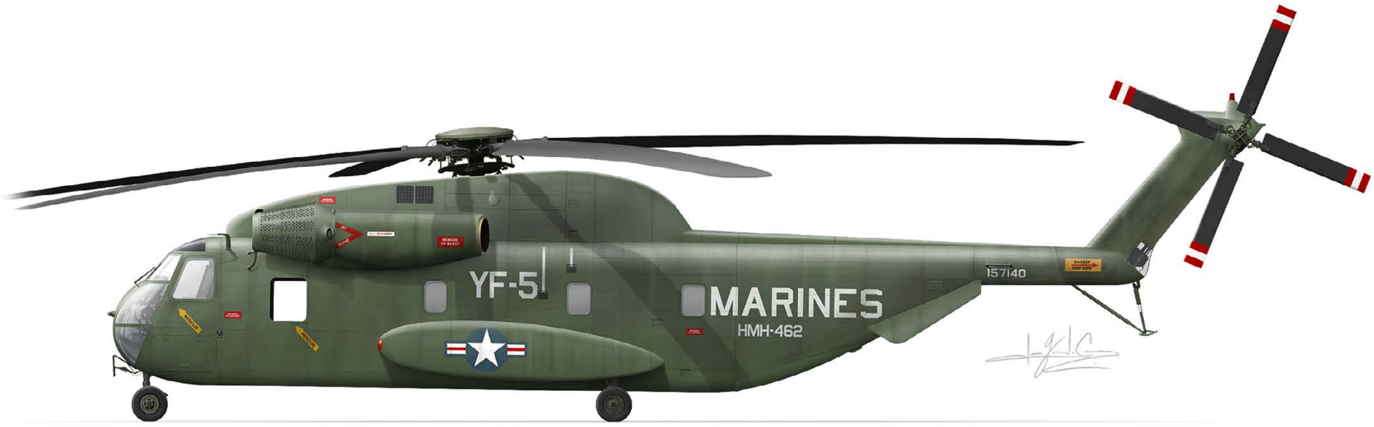
This F-5E Tiger II of 544 Fighter Squadron, 63 Wing, VNAF, was flown by defector 1st Lieutenant Nguyen Thanh Trung to North Vietnam. In turn, on 8 April 1975, Trung then bombed the South Vietnamese Presidential Palace in Saigon with Mk.81 bombs. For that mission, the aircraft was configured as illustrated here: with one Mk.81 under each of the four underwing hardpoints, and a drop tank under the centreline. (Artwork by Tom Cooper)



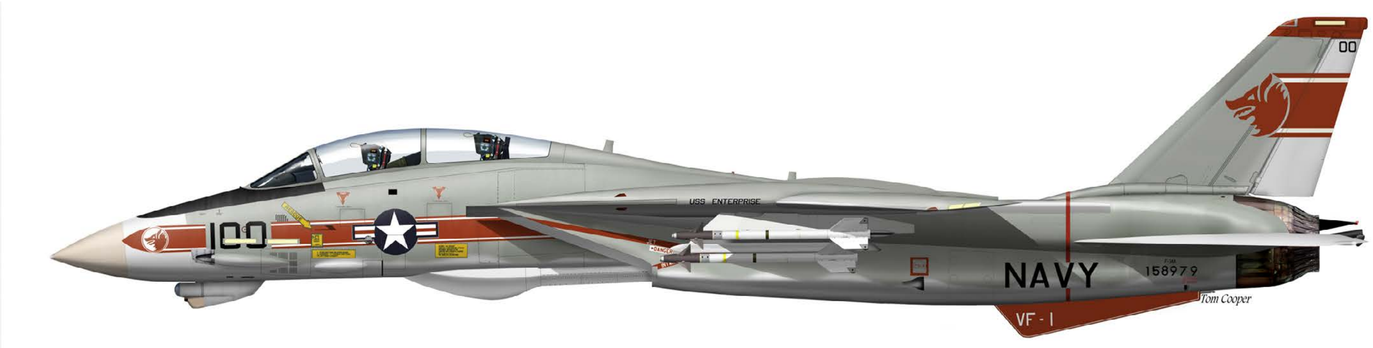
One of the most iconic images of the fall of Saigon showed this Air America Bell UH-1H (serial N 47004), piloted by Bob Caron. Along with another Bell 204B of the CIA owned 'airline', Caron flew a series of evacuation flights on 29 April 1975 from the Pittman Building, 22 Gia Long Street, residence of the CIA Assistant Chief of Saigon Station, Oren B. Harnage. This was one 13 landing spots atop various buildings throughout the city, selected by the CIA. The landing pad on which Caron landed when photographed was particularly tiny: positioned atop the roof of the elevator shaft, it was barely wide enough for the skids of his helicopter. (Artwork by Luca Canossa)



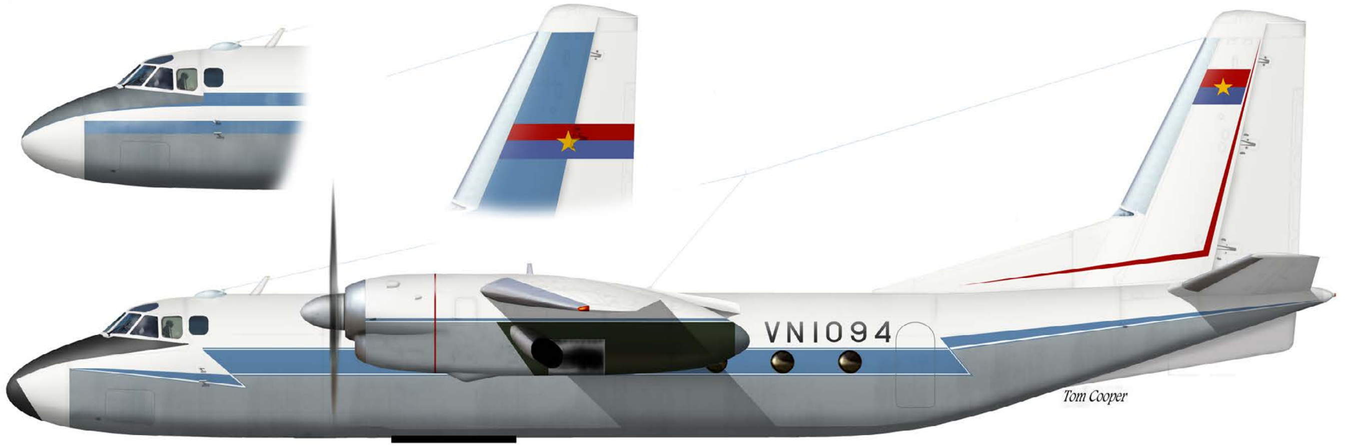
With the fall of Saigon imminent, between 18 and 24 April the US Navy rushed Task Force 76 to a position 30–50km off the coast in support of the evacuation of US and allied citizens. Amongst some 20 ships involved was the aircraft carrier USS *Hancock* (CVA-19), with CH-46Es from HMM-165 embarked. Helicopters of this unit deployed Marines that bolstered the defences of the embassy and widened the landing zone for heavier CH-53s, and then completed over 600 evacuation flights. Ironically, 47 years later, one of the CH-46Es involved in Operation Frequent Wind – BuNo 154038, shown here (though now wearing a civilian livery and the registration N38TU) – was involved in the evacuation of Kabul, in Afghanistan, while assigned to the Air Wing of the State Department's Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs. (Artwork by Pablo Albornoz)



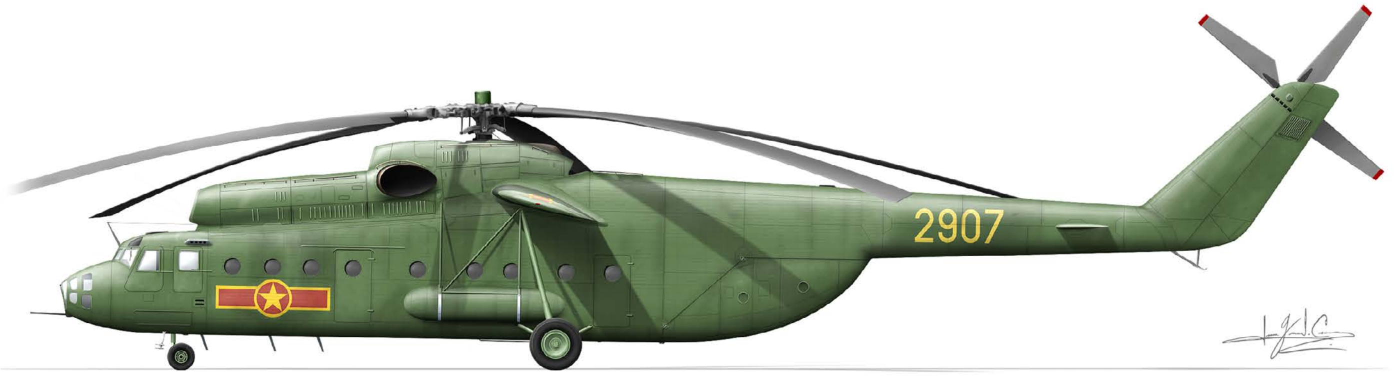
Operation Frequent Wind was initiated when the evacuation by fixed-wing aircraft had been shut down by North Vietnamese bombardment of the airports and air bases in the Saigon area. In addition to the CH-46Es of HMM-165, it involved CH-53Ds of Marine helicopter squadrons HMH-462 and HMH-463. Embarked aboard amphibious assault ship USS *Okinawa* (LPH-3), HMH-462 was fresh from Operation Eagle Pull (evacuation of Phnom Penh in Cambodia, conducted on 12 April 1975). It mainly picked up refugees form the American Defence Attaché Office compound near Tan Son Nhut AB, and the car parking lot inside the US Embassy. Only days later, HMH-462 was redeployed to the aircraft carrier USS *Hancock* and on 12 May 1975, it was also involved in the rescue operation for the crew of SS *Mayaguez*, hijacked by Khmer Rouge forces of Cambodia. (Artwork by Luca Canossa)



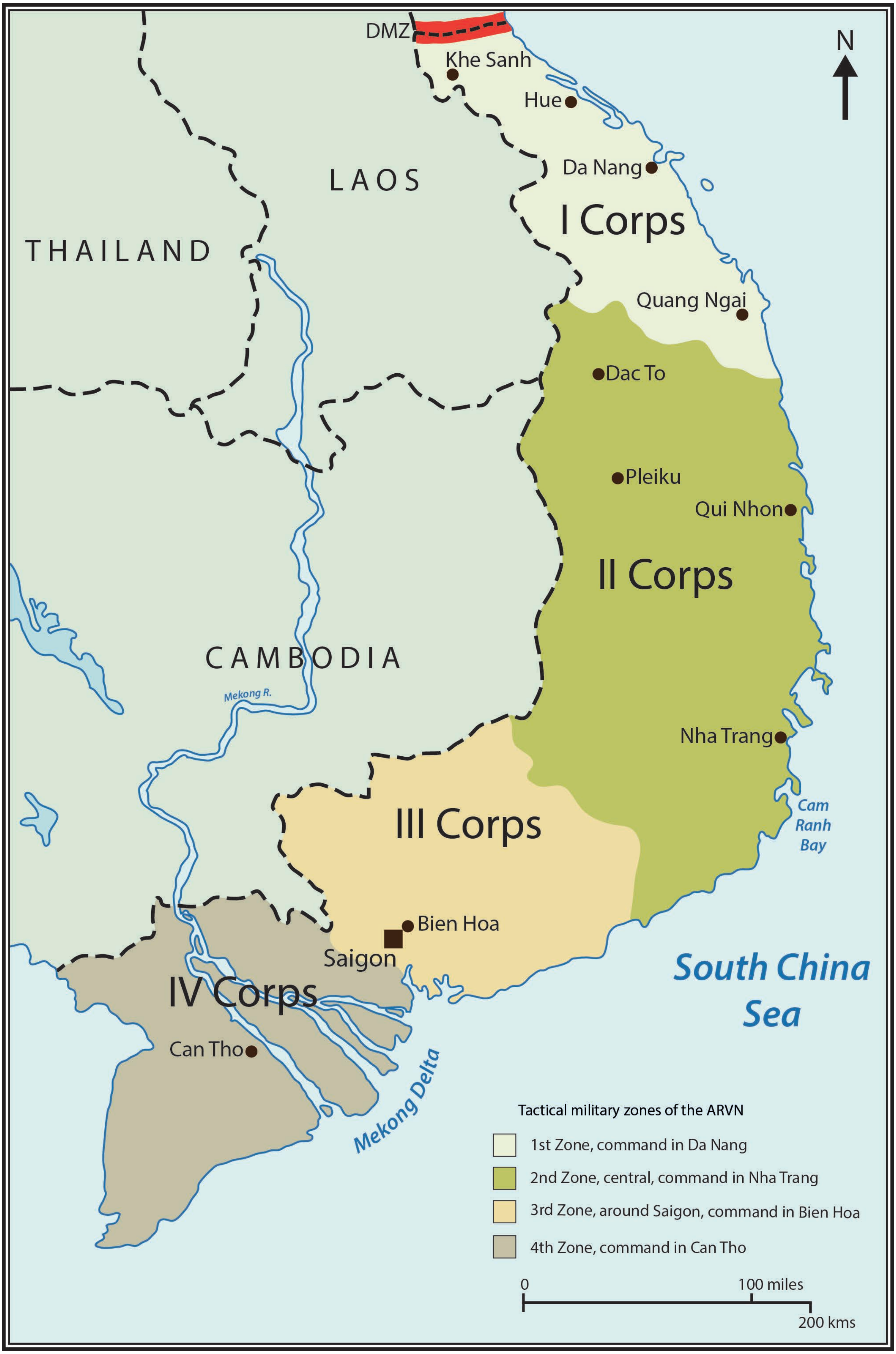
The Grumman F-14A Tomcat entered operational service just in time for the first two squadrons equipped with the type – VF-1 'Wolfpack' and VF-2 'Bounty Hunters' – to embark aboard USS *Enterprise* (CVAN-65) for a West Pacific cruise in September 1974. Although nearing the end of that cruise, together with USS *Coral Sea* (CVA-43), USS *Enterprise* was rushed to the coast of South Vietnam to provide cover for Operation Frequent Wind and this is how the Tomcats came to fly their first operational sorites over this country in late April 1975. This jet is shown in typical livery of VF-1, and typical weapons configuration for that cruise: the AN/ALR-23 IRST-system under the chin, four AIM-9H Sidewinder missiles on shoulder stations, and palettes for AIM-54 Phoenix missiles under the fuselage (AIM-7E4 Sparrows were available, but rarely carried). (Artwork by Tom Cooper)

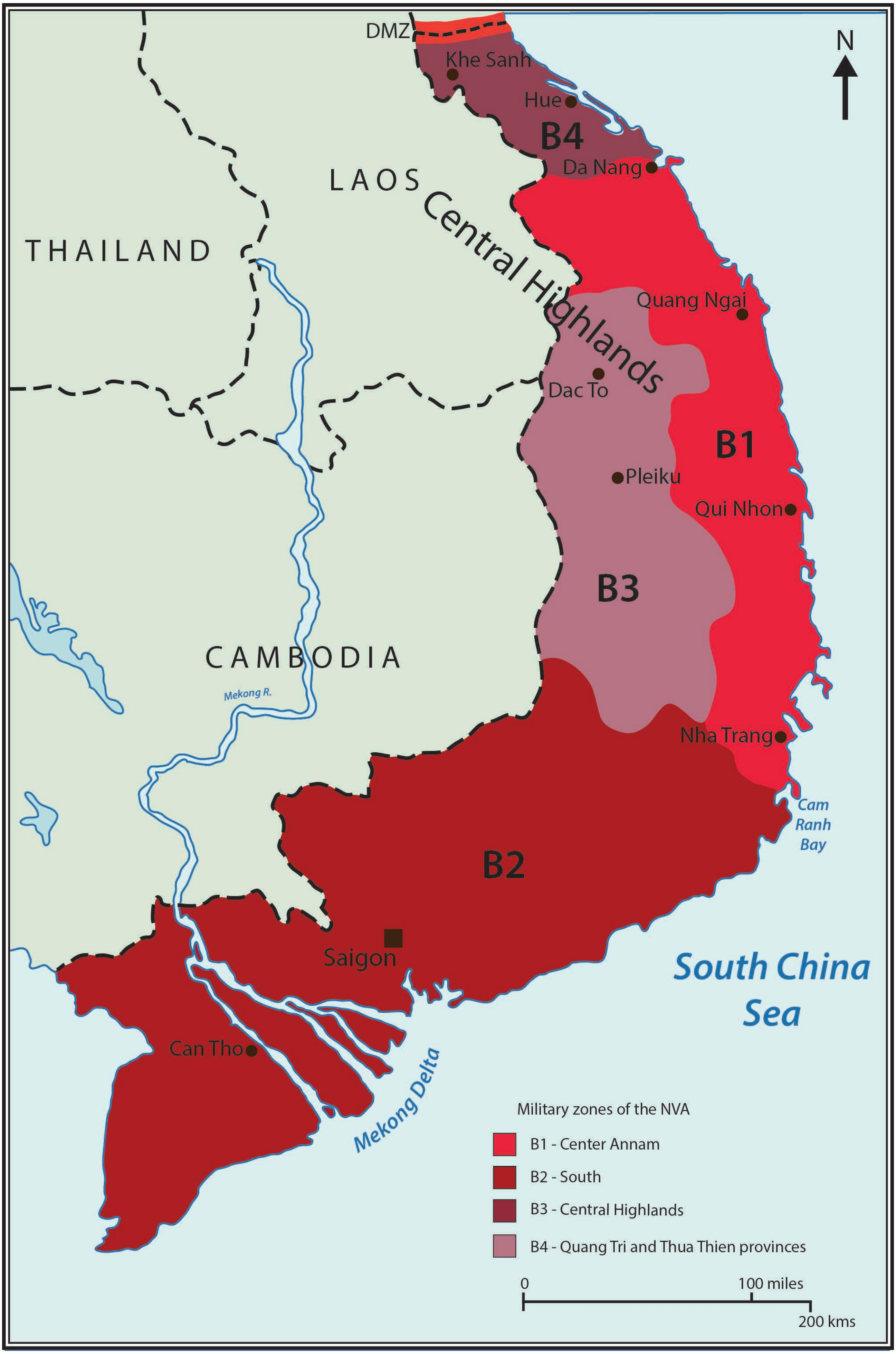


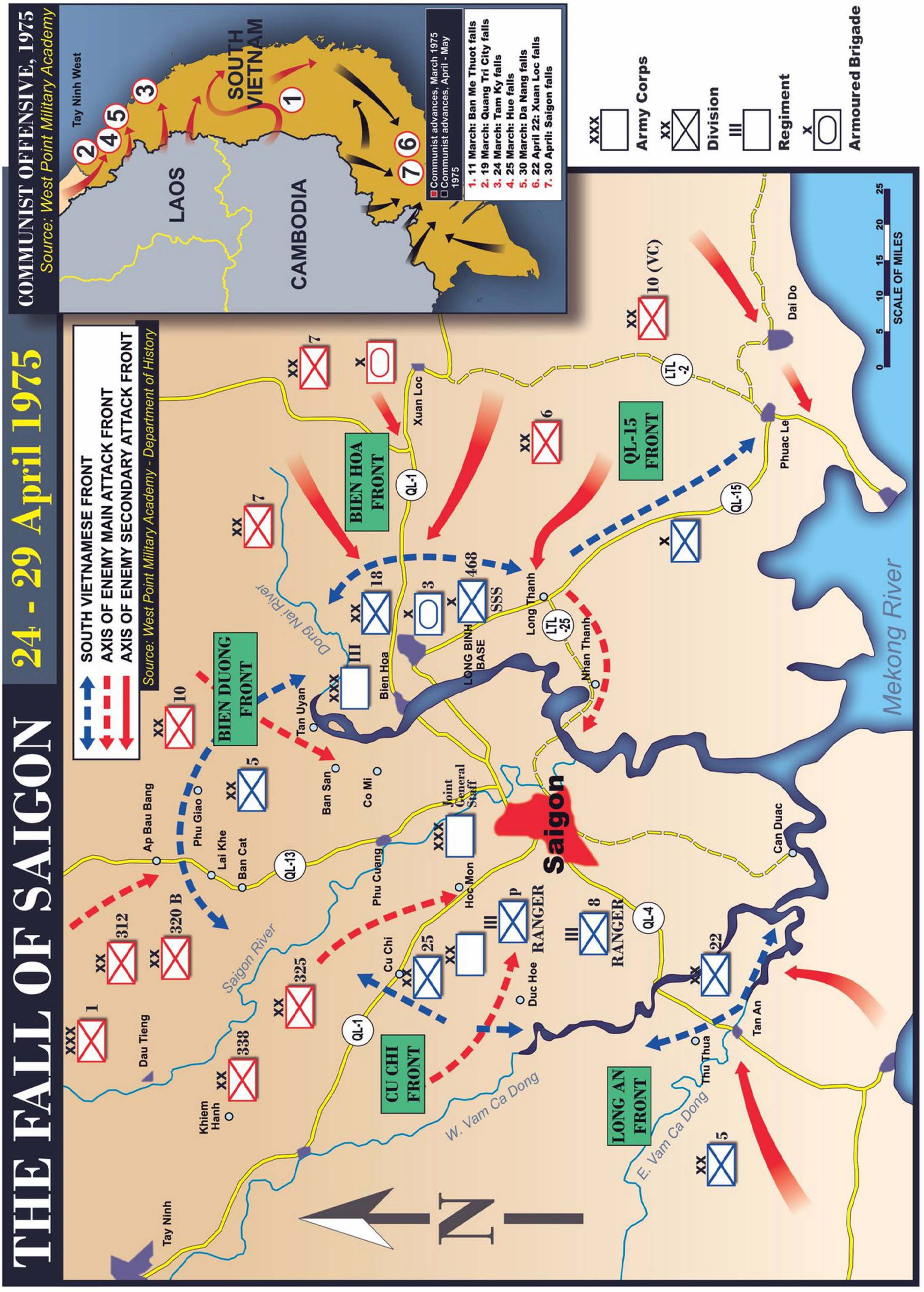
The 919th Transport Brigade operated all of the transport aircraft of the VPAF. Including 66 aircraft and 44 helicopters, it was fully mobilised for the final onslaught on South Vietnam and provided logistical support for the advance of the various North Vietnamese army corps converging towards Saigon. The unit had a dozen An-24s that had been delivered in two batches, taken from the Soviet civilian fleet. This former Aeroflot aircraft (serial VN 1094), as well as another airframe shown inset, was painted in the colours of the Provisional Revolutionary Government – National Liberation Front (Vietcong) markings for propaganda purposes. (Artwork by Tom Cooper)



Other mounts of the 919th Transport Brigade included 12 Mil Mi-6 heavy helicopters. All were deployed to South Vietnam in April 1975. Their payload carrying capacity (up to 12,000kg), as well as high top speed (300km/h) were much appreciated by their North Vietnamese crews. Contrary to some aircraft of the brigade, this one retained its original VPAF markings. (Artwork by Luca Canossa)


DMZ
Khe Sanh
Hue
N
Da Nang
LAOS
I Corps
THAILAND
Quang Ngai
Dac To
Pleiku
Qui Nhon
II Corps
CAMBODIA
Mekong R.
Nha Trang
Cam Ranh Bay
III Corps
Bien Hoa
Saigon
South China Sea
IV Corps
Can Tho
Mekong Delta
Tactical military zones of the ARVN
1st Zone, command in Da Nang
2nd Zone, central, command in Nha Trang
3rd Zone, around Saigon, command in Bien Hoa
4th Zone, command in Can Tho
0
100 miles
200 kms


DMZ
Khe Sanh
Hue
B4
Da Nang
LAOS
THAILAND
Central Highlands
Quang Ngai
Dac To
B1
Pleiku
Qui Nhon
B3
CAMBODIA
Mekong R.
Nha Trang
Cam Ranh Bay
B2
Saigon
Can Tho
Mekong Delta
South China Sea
N
Military zones of the NVA
B1 - Center Annam
B2 - South
B3 - Central Highlands
B4 - Quang Tri and Thua Thien provinces
0
100 miles
200 kms


THE FALL OF SAIGON
24 - 29 April 1975
SOUTH VIETNAMESE FRONT
AXIS OF ENEMY MAIN ATTACK FRONT
AXIS OF ENEMY SECONDARY ATTACK FRONT
Source: West Point Military Academy - Department of History
COMMUNIST OFFENSIVE, 1975
Source: West Point Military Academy
Tay Ninh West
LAOS
CAMBODIA
SOUTH VIETNAM
Communist advances, March 1975
Communist advances, April - May 1975
1. 11 March: Ban Me Thuot falls
2. 19 March: Quang Tri City falls
3. 24 March: Tam Ky falls
4. 25 March: Hue falls
5. 30 March: Da Nang falls
6. 22 April 22: Xuan Loc falls
7. 30 April: Saigon falls
XXX Army Corps
XX Division
III Regiment
X Armoured Brigade
SCALE OF MILES
0 5 10 15 20 25
Saigon
Joint General Staff
BIEN DUONG FRONT
BIEN HOA FRONT
QL-15 FRONT
CU CHI FRONT
LONG AN FRONT
Tay Ninh
Dau Tieng
Khiem Hanh
Ap Bau Bang
Phu Giao
Lai Khe
Ban Cat
Ban San
Co Mi
Tan Uyen
Bien Hoa
LONG BINH BASE
Long Thanh
Nhan Thanh
Xuan Loc
Phuoc Le
Dai Do
Phu Cuong
Hoc Mon
Cu Chi
Duc Hoe
Thu Thua
Tan An
Can Duoc
Saigon River
Dong Nai River
Mekong River
W. Vam Ca Dong
E. Vam Ca Dong
QL-1
QL-13
QL-4
QL-15
LTL -25
LTL -2
XXX 1
XX 312
XX 320 B
XX 325
XX 338
XX 10
XX 7
XX 7
X
XX 6
XX 10 (VC)
XX 5
XXX
III
XX 18
X 3
X 468
SSS
X
XXX
XX 25
XX
III P RANGER
III 8 RANGER
XX 22
XX 5
N

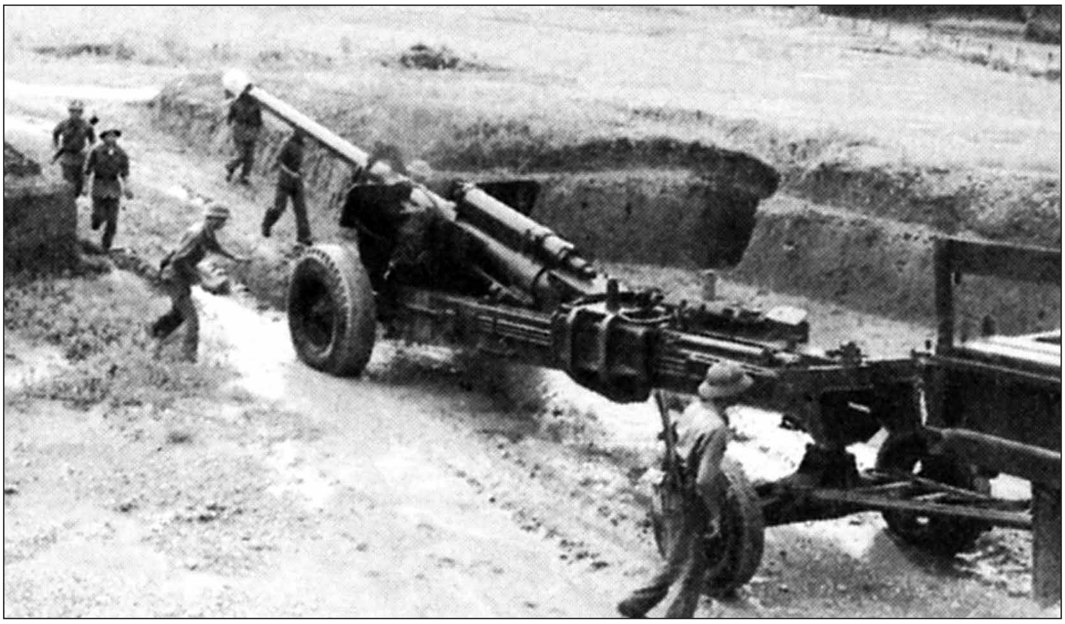
Aircraft Artillery Division, reinforced by a regiment from the 377th Division kept in reserve in North Vietnam.

On 23 April, Dung had 270,000 combat troops (250,000 main force and 20,000 local forces troops), as well as 180,000 strategic and campaign-level rear services troops. They were supported by 320 tanks and 81 APCs, 1,600 armoured cars, armoured anti-aircraft vehicles, tracked artillery tractors and specialised engineer vehicles, 10,000 trucks, 509 artillery pieces, 800 anti-aircraft guns, 24 SA-2s and their associated radars. More reinforcements were expected for the coming days. The 308th Division, initially retained for the defence of North Vietnam, had been sending in two of its three regiments. Some 150 armoured vehicles, additional SA-2s and SA-3s, artillery, and 36 ZSU-23-4s of the 237th Anti-Aircraft Artillery Regiment were speeding to the battlefield. Urgent tank ammunition and AT-3 Sager anti-tank missiles were delivered by VPAF transport aircraft and brought into the front lines by helicopters. Taken together, with the forces of the Public Security Ministry in charge of administering the "liberated areas", the North Vietnamese had more troops, over 550,000, than the Americans did at the height of their commitment, at around 543,000.

Lieutenant General Tran Van Tra, CO of the B2 Front, was put in charge of the offensive against Saigon's north, northwest, and southwest defence perimeters. (PAVN)

From this massive legion, Dung formed five attack prongs, and assigned primary targets to each of them. Central to his strategy were the armoured units. Dung detailed their employment with the CO of the Armoured Branch, Major General Dao Huy Vu. Striking from the west and southwest would be Group 232, consisting of the 5th, 9th, and 303rd Divisions plus the independent 16th Regiment and the 8th Division. The corps had 80 tanks, mainly PT-76s and Type 63s, with BTR-50s and M113s attached. Their mission was to cut Route 4, and then capture the ARVN Capital Military Zone Headquarters and the National Police Headquarters. From the northwest, the 3rd SAC, consisting of the 10th, 316th, and 320th Divisions, the 198th Assault Sapper Regiment, and the brigade-sized 273rd Armoured Regiment would destroy the ARVN 25th Division and capture Tan Son Nhut AB. From the north, the 1st SAC, with the 312th and 320B Divisions, supported by the 202nd Armoured Brigade, would destroy the ARVN 5th Division, and then capture the JGS Headquarters near Tan San Nhut AB. From the east, the 4th SAC, with the 6th, 7th, and 341st Divisions, supported by the brigade-sized 26th Armoured Group, would wipe out the ARVN 18th Division, capture Bien Hoa AB, and then move on to the Presidential

Lieutenant General Le Tron Tan was assigned at the head of the 2nd and 4th SACs to attack Saigon's eastern defence perimeter. He is seen here, third from left, with the commanding staff of the PAVN 304 Division. (PAVN)



By 25 April 1975, the North Vietnamese completed their preparations for the final offensive against Saigon by positioning their artillery, like this M-46 130mm gun of the 2nd SAC. (PAVN)

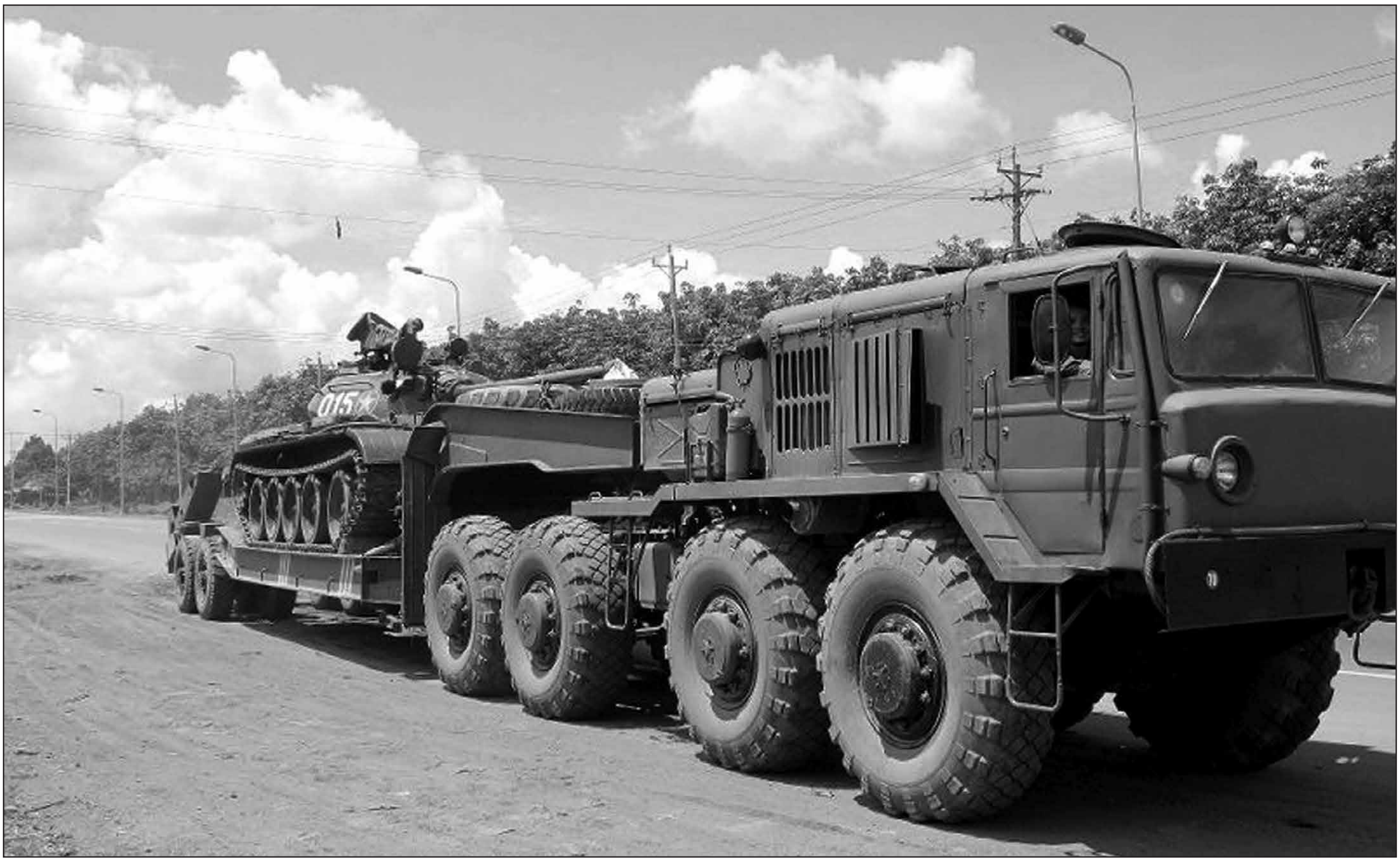
Most of the massive North Vietnamese air defence system was transferred to the South to protect their main battle corps advancing towards Saigon, like these M-1939 37mm AA guns towed by GAZ-63 trucks, of Group 232. (PAVN)

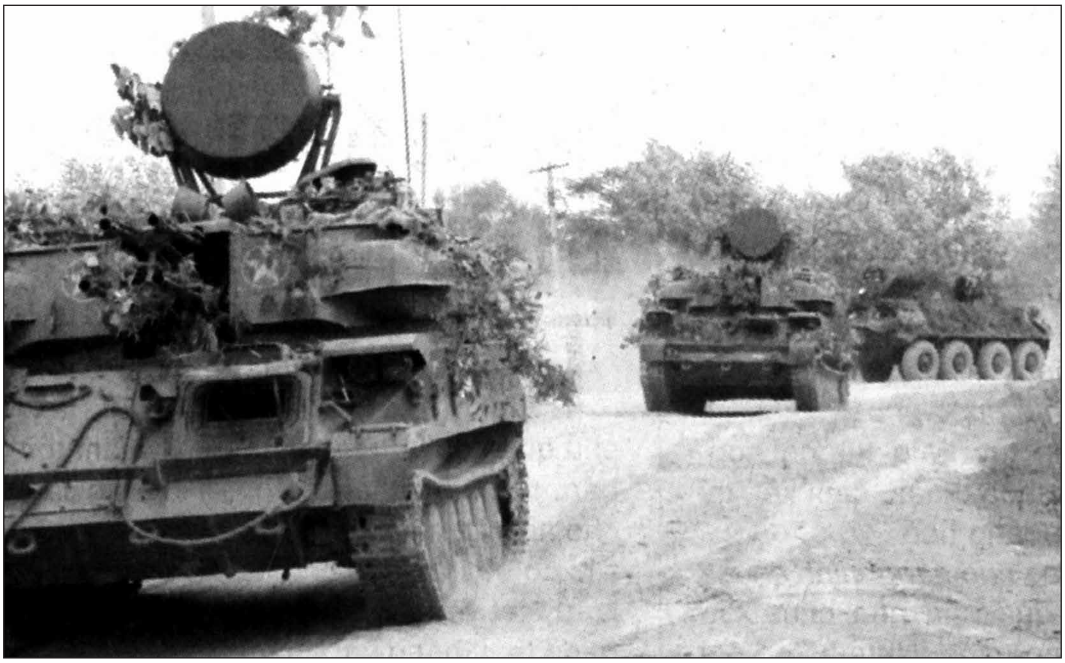
A KS-19 100mm anti-aircraft artillery gun of the 367th Anti-Aircraft Artillery Division positioned in the northern sector of Saigon, protecting the units of the 1st SAC. (PAVN)

Palace. On the 4th SAC left flank was the 2nd SAC, with the 3rd, 304th, and 325th Divisions and the 203rd Armoured Brigade. The 304th Division would take the ARVN Armour School at Nuoc Trong, the logistic centre of Long Binh, and then, in conjunction with the 4th SAC, secure the Presidential Palace. The 325th Division would cut Route 15 and then swing south of Saigon. The 3rd Division would grab Phuoc Tuy Province and then move towards Vung Tau. In the Mekong Delta, the 4th Division would attack Can Tho.

Each Corps would organise two types of forces. The first group would carry out the principal attack against ARVN divisions on the outer perimeter. After the main ARVN units were pinned down, powerful armour-led deep-penetration task forces would race into Saigon to seize the five nerve centres, whose loss would cause immediate South Vietnamese collapse. Before launching the strike force, however, PAVN first had to take the 14 bridges leading into Saigon. The area around the city was crisscrossed with rivers and swamps, particularly in the southwest sector. Most of the specialised engineer and pontoon bridge equipment was then allocated to Group 232, since it had to traverse the extensive marshes between Cambodia and the Vam Co Dong River. Although Tra had initially ordered his assault sapper regiments to seize the five main objectives, on 25 April, Dung reversed the order. Instead, these shock troops would seize the bridges first. The timing of the bridge attacks was crucial: if the Dac Congs struck too soon, the ARVN forces would decimate them. If they waited too long, ARVN would destroy the bridges. To compensate, Dung gave each Corps the authority to decide when to deploy its sappers. A mistake in the decision and the PAVN motorised columns would be delayed if not outright stopped. The fight for the capital would then degenerate into vicious block by block, house by house fighting. The North Vietnamese had meanwhile elaborated artillery support fire plans to support this kind of street fighting. They had amassed some 70,000 artillery shells for guns and 120mm and 160mmm heavy mortars, as well as 30,000 rockets for the purpose.

On 21 April, Giap gave the order to Dung that the time had come to launch the ultimate offensive. The later asked for a few more days of


A PAVN MAZ-537 tractor towing a ChMZAP-524G semi-trailer with a T-54 tank on Route 1, speeding towards Saigon. (PAVN)


The ZSU-23-4s of the PAVN 237th Anti-Aircraft Artillery Regiment participated in the last phase of the Saigon Battle, attached to the 1st SAC. (PAVN)

delay to finalise the assembling of his forces and to studying the unfamiliar terrain. Finally, Dung set the date on 26 April. He organised his forces in three main groupings: on the eastern sector, with a combined thrust of the 2nd and 4th SACs, with 170 tanks, placed under the command Lieutenant General Le Tron Tan; in the northern sector, with a coordinated attack carried out by the 1st and 3rd SAC; and Group 232 in charge of sealing off Saigon from the Mekong Delta by cutting Route 4. These last two sectors were placed under the command of the B2 Front CO, Lieutenant General Tran Van Tra. By dividing the command authority of the battlefield, Dung probably cleverly played the rivalry opposing Tan to Tra, pushing one to advance faster than the other to be the first inside Saigon.

The Ho Chi Minh Campaign started on 26 April at 5:00 p.m. against the ARVN eastern perimeter, when some 20 PAVN artillery battalions simultaneously opened fire. The 2nd SAC engaged its whole 203rd Armoured Brigade, supporting the 304th Division driving down Route 15 to attack the ARVN Armour School at Nuoc Trung, then turn north towards the logistic depot of Long Binh. It would then cross the Dong Nai River Bridge and move along the Saigon – Bien Hoa highway into the capital. The North Vietnamese tanks would also support the 325th Division that would capture the district town of Long Thanh south of the Armour School, and then swing south of Saigon along Route 25 and strike at the Cat Lai ferry just across the Saigon River from the New Port Bridge. The 325th Division would then deploy its artillery to shell the Tan San Nhut AB. In meantime, the 3rd Division would attack Phuoc Tuy Province and seize the port city of Vung Tau.

With the 1st Tank Battalion leading, the 9th Regiment of the 304th Division struck the Armour School and partly captured it after an hour of fighting. A dozen T-54s of the 5th Company

If the VPAF did not engage its combat aircraft during the final offensive against South Vietnam, its transport units were very active by supporting the advancing North Vietnamese divisions with ammunition and troops, like these An-24s of the 919th Transport Brigade. (VPAF)

VPAF helicopters like this Mil Mi-6 brought in artillery and tank ammunition to forward units advancing towards Saigon. (VPAF)

The PAVN Command Post of the Ho Chi Minh Campaign, sitting from left to right, Senior General Van Tien Dung, PAVN Commander in Chief, Politburo Special Representative Le Duc Tho, and Campaign Political Commissar Pham Hung. Le Duc Tho received a Nobel Peace Price with Henry Kissinger for signing the Paris Accords of January 1973. (VNA)

quickly dispatched a dozen ARVN M113s and four tanks. But some M41s manned by instructors stubbornly resisted on the southern part of the base. They counterattacked and reclaimed some lost grounds but were not enough to retake the school. Lieutenant General Toan immediately reacted and sent in TF-322 of Major Nguyen Van Lien, with the 7th Airborne Battalion, and the 82nd Ranger Battalion to the rescue. With efficient VNAF support, the armoured task force turned back several other PAVN attacks, destroying 15 T-54s against the loss of four M48s, and temporarily stopped on place the 304th Division.

On the 304th Division's right flank, at 4:00 a.m. on 27 April, the 341st Division attacked the ARVN 18th Division holding Trang Bom. The initial attack was repelled, but flanking attacks broke through, and at 8:30 a.m., Trang Bom downtown fell to the tanks of the 26th Armoured Group. Major General Le Minh Dao decided to pull back his unit, but his rear guard was badly mauled by the 270th Regiment when withdrawing towards Long Binh. PAVN forces also pushed forward to engage the 468th Marine Brigade at Ho Nai.

On the 304th Division's left flank, the 325th Division attacked Long Thanh, sending a tank-led battalion first. The unit entered the town with little opposition, but instead of melting away at the sight of the 12 T-54s of the 6th Tank Company, the RF soldiers broke into small teams and began ambushing the North Vietnamese troops, knocking out two T-54s. The division commander ordered his columns to retreat and resume the attack at daybreak. But the RFs held firm, and several more enemy tanks were destroyed. The

On 26 April, the PAVN 304th Division, supported by the 1st Tank Battalion, attacked down Route 15, opening the final offensive against Saigon. (VNA)

Troops of the PAVN 304th Division entering the ARVN Armour School at Nuoc Trung and passing by this disused ARVN M48. (PAVN)

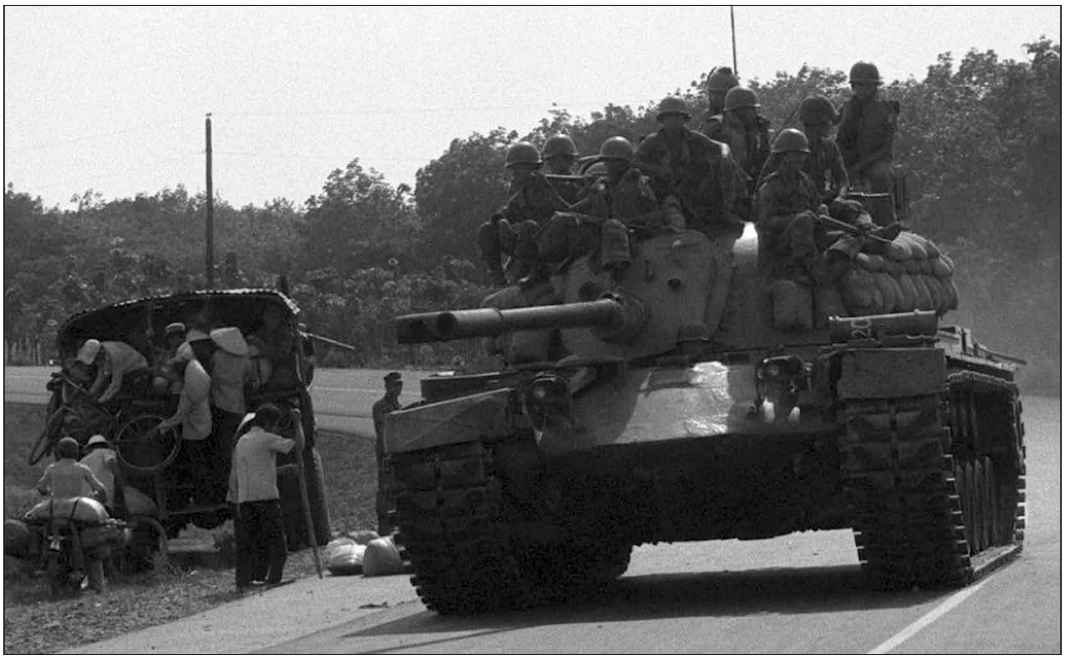
The North Vietnamese also captured several M113 APCs at the ARVN Armour School at Nuoc Trung, including this M132 flamethrower variant in the foreground. (PAVN)

VNAF continued to provide support, flying 38 strike sorties against the 304th and 325th Divisions on 26 April, and another 109 sorties the next day.

In Phuoc Tuy Province, the PAVN 3rd Division's plan called for the 12th Regiment to strike south along Route 2, while the 141st Regiment and a tank company would sneak behind ARVN lines and assault Ba Ria. They would continue south on Route 15 and grab the bridge spanning the Co May River, the gateway to Vung Tau. Once the bridge was taken, the 2nd Regiment, also reinforced by a battalion of Type 63 tanks and BTR-50s, would make a deep penetration strike to seize Vung Tau.

The PAVN 3rd Division attacked at 6:00 p.m., 26 April. The tanks drove into Ba Ria, but the infantry was unable to keep up, allowing the ARVN 1st Airborne Brigade to counterattack and drive them out, knocking out six tanks with TOWs and M72 LAWs. The next morning the 141st Regiment attacked again, but the Airborne again repulsed the assault. The PAVN pressure, however, forced Major General Hinh to pull his forces back across the Co May River. The bridge was blown up in the afternoon and two paratrooper battalions that were struck on the Ba Ria side of the river had to walk across marshy salt flats to reach the other side. The PAVN 3rd Division resumed its attack at midnight on 28 April. Throughout the night the 2nd Regiment attempted to cross the Co May, but the Airborne refused to budge. At dawn, two PAVN infantry companies managed to cross a mangrove swamp on the far bank, but they were pinned down and unable to advance. The division commander then sent the 12th Regiment southeast to the coast, commandeered some fishing boats, and snuck across the marsh to a village about 6km south of the bridge. With the appearance of the enemy in its rear, and a new attack by the 2nd Regiment, the 1st Airborne Brigade was forced to retreat from the bridge. While pulling back, it was ambushed. Despite heavy losses, the paratroopers fought their way into Vung Tau. The port city now began to be shelled by PAVN artillery. Saigon's gate to the sea was sealed.

Meanwhile, the Assault Sappers of Lieutenant General Tan had to capture five critical bridges. The firsts were the two that spanned the Dong Nai River west of Bien Hoa. The first was the so-called New Bridge, the second was the Ghenh Bridge on Route 1. These two objectives were assigned to the Assault Sappers of B2 Front assigned to Tan. His own Dac Cong of the 2nd SAC had to take the bridge on the Dong Nai just west of Long Binh, plus the next two bridges on the Saigon – Bien Hoa highway. On 26 April, the Dac Cong attacked the three Dong Nai River bridges, which were guarded by


An ARVN M48 of TF-322, 3rd Armoured Brigade, sent to counterattack, temporarily stopped the PAVN 304th Division's progress. (VNA)

the 5th Airborne Battalion. The sappers were unable to capture the Dong Nai and the New Bridge, but by the early morning of 27 April, they had seized the Ghenh Bridge, though the paratroopers soon counterattacked and recaptured it. The equally tough Dac Cong charged the bridge several more times, and 50 of them died, but control remained firmly in ARVN hands.

The PAVN 304th Division was forced to withdraw from Nuoc Trung after suffering heavy casualties at the hands of the South Vietnamese tankers of TF-322. This T-54 tank, and GAZ-63 truck were destroyed by the Pattons. (ARVN)

A PAVN K-63 APC of the 203rd Armoured Brigade knocked out by M48s of the ARVN TF-322. (ARVN)

Despite the failure of the sappers to grab the bridges, after capturing Trang Bom, the 4th SAC now moved towards the huge military base at Bien Hoa. Only the district town of Ho Nai blocked their path on Route 1, a city populated by Catholic refugees from North Vietnam. The South Vietnamese defences consisted of local PF forces, a troop of M48 tanks, and the 6th Marine Battalion, 369th Brigade, led by Lt Col Le Ba Binh. On the morning of 27 April, the PAVN 341st Division began probing the defences of the city, but the two engaged battalions were pushed back, with one T-54 destroyed. The next day, the 341st Division resumed the assault after a day-long artillery barrage. A regiment succeeded in punching through the city's centre, but local militiamen opened fire from buildings. A group of five T-54s that was driving up the main avenue was engaged by the Pattons which knocked out three of them. The Marines then counterattacked. Lieutenant General Tan was shocked by the stiff resistance put up by Ho Nai's population. The PAVN 7th Division's deep-penetration group was sitting in the rear, unable to advance under attacks by VNAF. In two days of fighting, Tan had been unable to crush the ARVN eastern perimeter, having lost some 30 T-54s.

In the meantime, Dung also unleashed his forces against the ARVN northern perimeter held by the 5th Division positioned astride Route 5. Its main units were dug-in at three former American bases: Lai Khe, Ben Cat, and Phu Loi. To defeat the 5th Division, the PAVN plan called for the 1st SAC's 312th Division, supported by the 3rd Tank Battalion, to bypass the heavily fortified bases at Lai Khe and Ben Cat, and strike the base at Phu Loi, the one closest to Saigon. Concurrently, the 320B Division would conduct a deep-penetration strike east of Route 13 along a secondary dirt road called Route 16. The division was reinforced by the 66th Armoured Battalion, and the 1st Tank Company of the 244th Armoured Battalion. To enable the

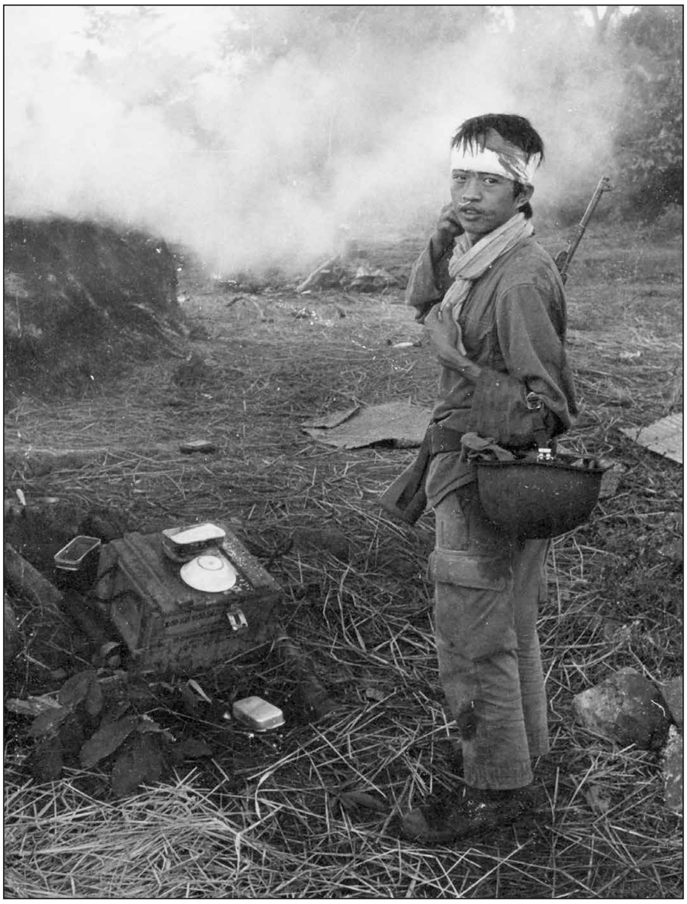
One of the most important tasks of the Ho Chi Minh Campaign was the capture of some 14 bridges leading into Saigon by the PAVN Assault Sapper troops. These Dac Cong of the 198th Assault Sapper Regiment are ready to attack an ARVN outpost protecting a bridge along the Dong Nai River. (PAVN)

Troops of the ARVN 18th Division in Trang Bom contesting the advance of the PAVN 341 Division. The unit was soon withdrawn to protect the Long Binh logistic base. (Ung Buu Hoang Nguyen Collection)

A T-54 of the PAVN 203rd Armoured Brigade supports the attack of the 325th Division against Long Thanh on 27 April. (PAVN)

Covering the southern flank of the PAVN offensive against the eastern defence sector of Saigon was an attack carried out by the 3rd Division against Vung Tau, cutting the South Vietnamese escape route to the sea. The unit was supported by Type 63 tanks and BTR-50 APCs, like these ones armed with twin 23mm AA guns on Route 15. (PAVN)

unit to easily advance, the Corps' 299th Engineer Brigade secretly constructed a 50km road that linked up 320B's assembly area with Route 16. The 312th Division opened fire at 4:30 p.m., on 27 April. Two regiments moved forward and seized the road junctions near Phu Loi, lightly defended by RF troops. In the meantime, the 320B Division began advancing along the newly built road and reached Route 16 on the morning of 28 April. Back at Phu Loi, the well-entrenched ARVN troops inside the base resisted stubbornly, pushing back every attack. Finally, on the night of 28 April, the 320B Division send its 27th Regiment to attack the supporting position of Tan Uyen. But again, the South Vietnamese resisted, forcing the engagement of the whole 66th Armoured Battalion. Another armoured column attacked Tan Uyen from the rear side, in the direction of Lai Thieu. It took two days for PAVN to conquer the Phu Loi base where eight M113s and three M41s were captured and pressed into service with the 66th Armoured Battalion.



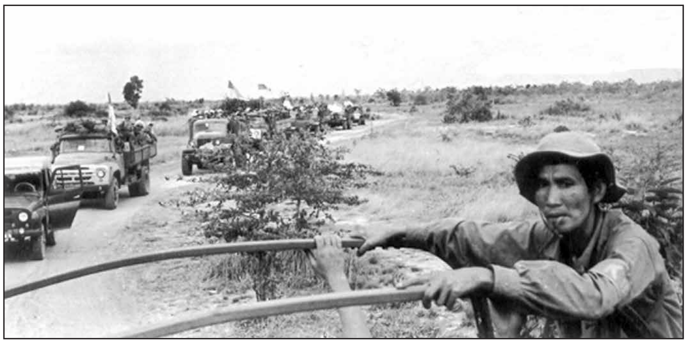
A young soldier, armed with an M1 carbine, of the local PF force who so tenaciously defended the Catholic villages around Ho Nai. (Ung Buu Hoang Nguyen Collection)

South and west of Saigon, Group 232 was trying to cope with Dung's tightly timetabled schedule. Since mid-April, its 303rd Division had been pulled back west of the Vam Co Dong River near the Cambodian border, alongside the 9th Division. To cross the river, the 303rd Division sent one regiment to the eastern side to secure a bridgehead and clear away RF positions. Fighting for three days, PAVN captured two villages, opening the way for the follow-on columns to cross the river on the night of 26 April. Heavy rains had turned the road into a swampy quagmire and a massive convoy soon stretched 10km from the Cambodian border to the river. The North Vietnamese pressganged the local population into cutting bushes to place on the road so the vehicles could gain traction. The 303rd Division now pressed on for the crossing point, attacking An Hiep. Facing stubborn resistance, the division commander launched another attack with the M113s of the 33rd Armoured Company and two PT-76s. They succeeded in capturing a saliant at around 3:00 p.m. near Tan My. The rains had swollen the river on both sides,

Simultaneously to the offensive taking place against Saigon's eastern perimeter, the PAVN 1st SAC attacked the northern approaches of the city. These troops of the 312th Division, supported by the 3rd Tank Battalion, attacked along Route 5, encountering a fierce resistance by ARVN 5th Division. (PAVN)

The troops of the ARVN 5th Division fought off the North Vietnamese attacks against Phu Loi for two days. The soldier in the foreground has just fired a 57mm recoilless gun. (Ung Buu Hoang Nguyen Collection)

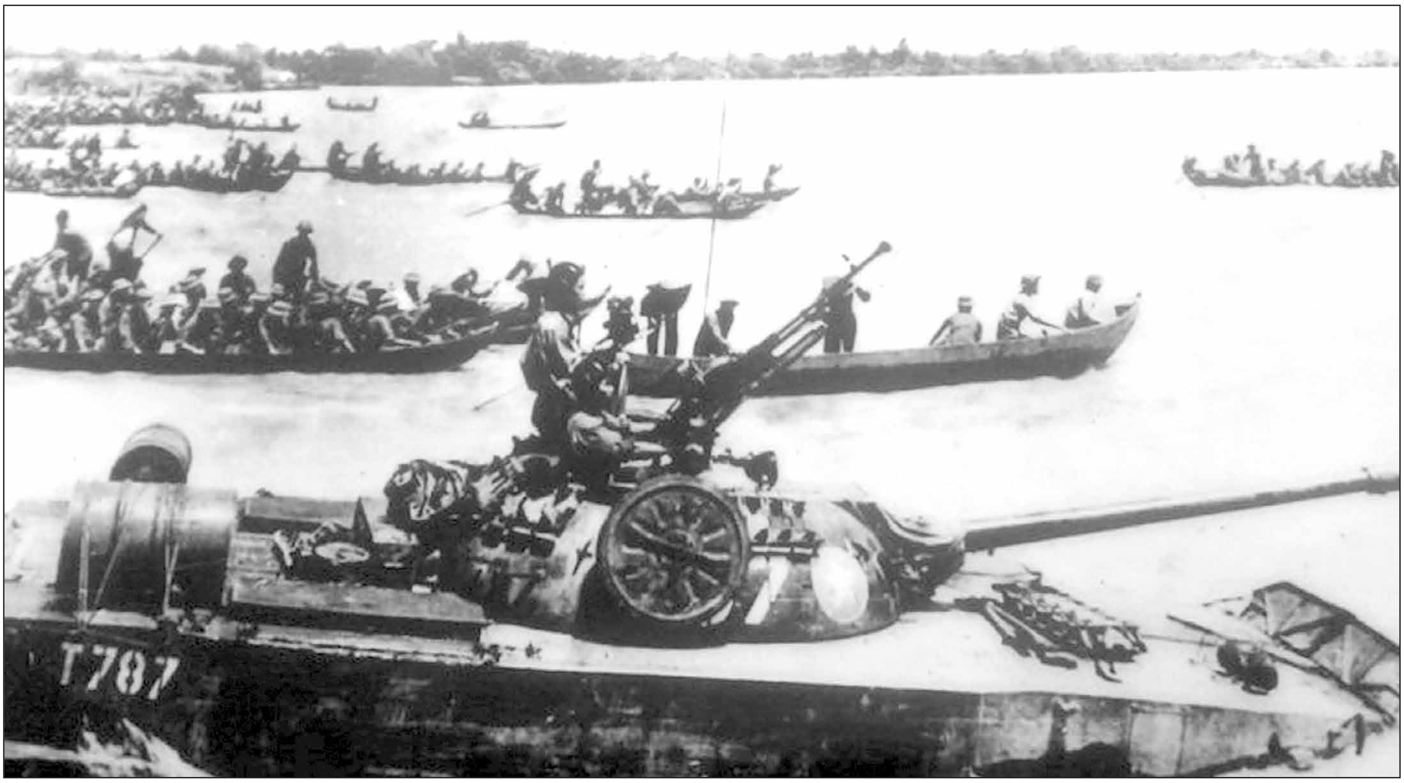
On 28 April the PAVN 312th Division finally captured the base at Phu Loi from the ARVN 5th Division. These North Vietnamese troops captured this M548 tractor alongside M113 APCs and M41 tanks of the 1st ACS. (PAVN)



The PAVN 303rd Division force marched from the Cambodian border to grasp the crossing points on the western side of the Vam Co Dong River. (PAVN)

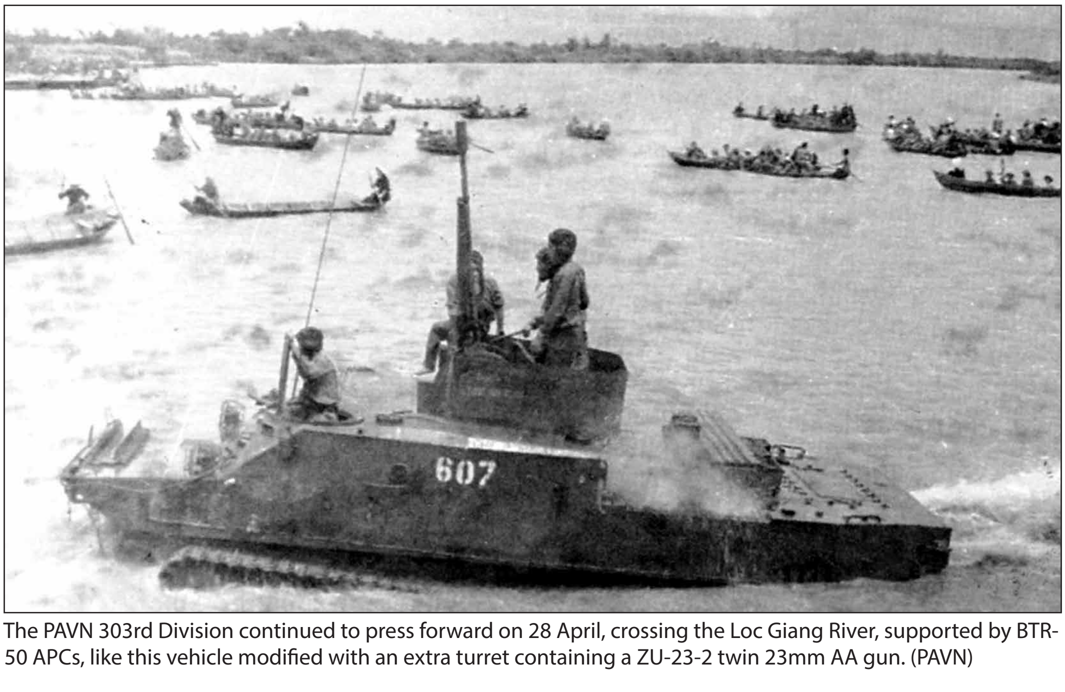
forcing the engineers to put a half float in the middle of it, then, they built ferries to move the vehicles from one bank to the float, and then to the other side. Unfortunately, the VNAF began to contest the river crossing and the Type 63s and PT-76s were ordered to cross anyway in amphibious mode. It took the whole night of 27 April to laboriously ferry the vehicles across.

By the morning of 28 April, the 303rd Division had successfully crossed over. It then moved to Route 10 and turned south to attack the Hau Nghia provincial capital, Khiem Cuong. Leading were the 8th and 33rd Armoured Companies that crossed the Loc Giang River before capturing the bridge of So Do on Route 10, at the gate of Khiem Cuong and the 9th Division also started to cross on the night of 28 April. Meanwhile, the 5th Division was instructed to cut Route 4 but was counterattacked by the depleted ARVN 22nd Division. A new attack at dawn on 28 April was again pushed back. The 5th Division, with the support of 12 PT-76s of the 45th Tank Company,



On 27 April, the North Vietnamese succeeded in capturing a bridgehead on the eastern bank of the Vam Co Dong River. Troops crossed on requisitioned sampans under the protection of a Type 63 tank. (PAVN)

The PAVN 9th Division, detached from the 4th SAC to the Group 232, also crossed the Vam Co Dong River with the help of captured M113s. (PAVN)



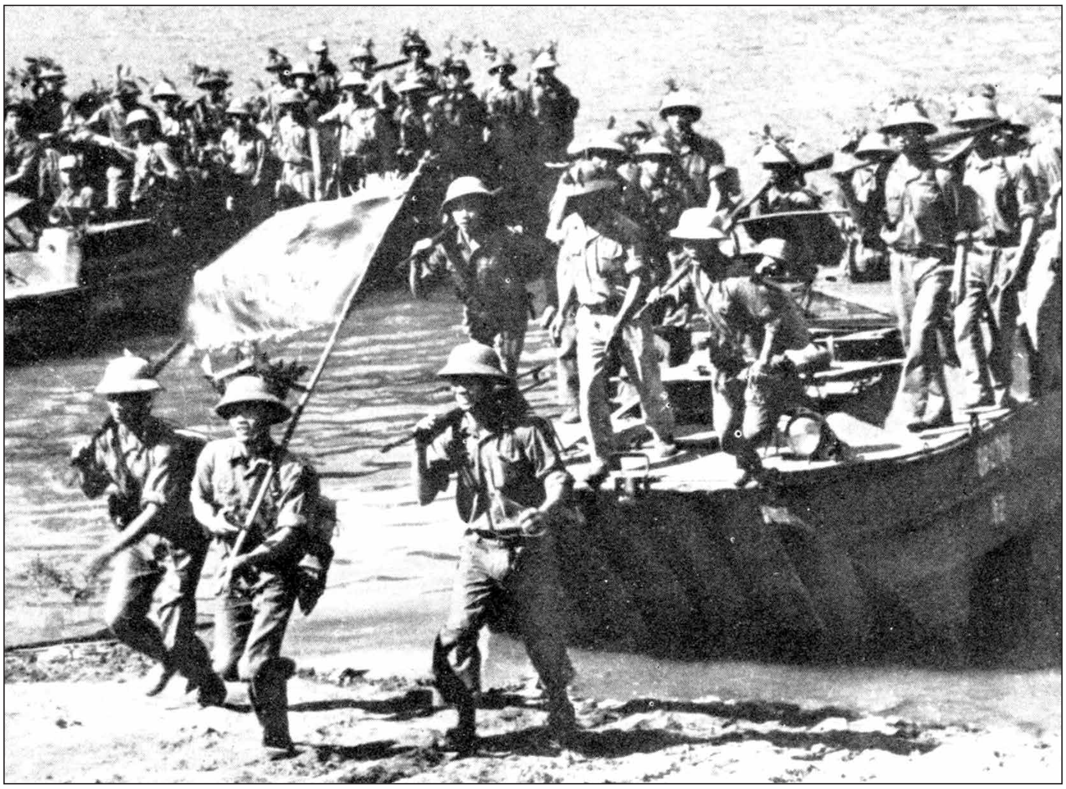
The PAVN 303rd Division continued to press forward on 28 April, crossing the Loc Giang River, supported by BTR-50 APCs, like this vehicle modified with an extra turret containing a ZU-23-2 twin 23mm AA gun. (PAVN)

then entrenched on positions west of the road, shelling it to disrupt traffic.

On Saigon's north-western front, the PAVN 3rd SAC also prepared to swing into action but with nearly two days of delay. To prevent ARVN forces from falling back from Tay Ninh, the 316th Division would cut Route 22 and also attack Trang Bang on Route 1. Once the 316th Division captured that last town, the 320th Division would assault the ARVN 25th Division headquarters at Dong Du near Cu Chi. With the 25th Division pinned down, the 198th Assault Sapper Regiment would slip past the ARVN defences and seize the Bong Bridge on Route 1, and the Sang Bridge on Route 15. These two routes were the only roads across the flat rice fields into Saigon. After these bridges were captured, the PAVN 10th Division would conduct deep-penetration attacks along both roads to grab Tan Son Nhut AB and the ARVN Joint General Staff Headquarters.

The ARVN 25th Division's CO, Brigadier General Ly Tong

Ba, had his 49th Regiment defending Tay Ninh, the 46th Regiment holding Trang Bang, the 32nd Ranger Group keeping Route 22 open, and the 50th Regiment holding Cu Chi. However, Lieutenant General Toan ordered Ba to send his organic 10th ACS and two battalions of the 50th Regiment to bolster both Hau Nghia Province and Trang Bang, depleting Ba's defence at Dong Du. The PAVN 316th Division, supported by the 3rd Armoured Battalion, struck at 7:00 a.m., on 28 April. Launching attacks along a 40km stretch of Routes 22 and 1, the North Vietnamese slowly rolled up RF positions on the roads. They bypassed Tay Ninh, but fierce fighting erupted at the heavily defended town of Trang Bang, as the ARVN 46th Regiment threw back several assaults, supported by 20 VNAF air strikes. During a South Vietnamese counterattack, a troop of M113s was however badly mauled. In a daring move, Ba decided to redeploy by air the 49th Regiment from Tay Ninh to Dong Du. Despite heavy flack, no helicopters were lost. The defence of Tay Ninh was then left to RF and Rangers. Still worried about his defences at Dong Du, Ba also recalled his 1st Battalion, 50th Regiment, and the armour, which he had sent out to defend Trang Bang but during the move, the dispirited battalion commander disbanded his

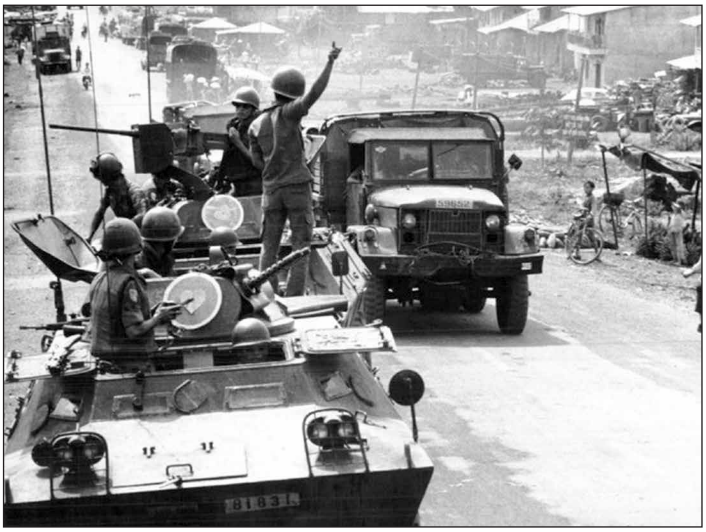

Troops of the PAVN 9th Division crossed the Vam Co Dong River in Soviet-built BAV-485 amphibious trucks. (PAVN)

Due to the swampy nature of the terrain it had to operate in, bordering the Plain of Reeds, Group 232 was allocated much of the PAVN's specialised engineering equipment, like this PMP pontoon bridge section mounted on a KrAZ-214 truck chassis. (PAVN)

Although most of the 70 tanks assigned to Group 232 were amphibious PT-76 and Type 63 light tanks, a company of T-54s was also attached despite the swampy nature of the terrain southwest of Saigon that made its use difficult. (PAVN)

The PAVN 320th Division, supported by tanks of the 202nd Armoured Brigade, attacked the northern perimeter protecting Saigon on 27 April defended by the ARVN 25th Division. (PAVN)

In the meantime, Saigon's northern front was also attacked by the PAVN 316th Division, progressing along Route 22, supported by the armour of the 202nd Armoured Brigade, like this BTR-60 APC. (PAVN)



The ARVN 25th Division tried desperately to keep open Route 22, linking Saigon to Tay Ninh, being the lifeline for supplying its three regiments installed in three strongpoints along the highway. These V100 armoured reconnaissance cars of the 10th ACS were escorting a supply convoy. (US Army)

The positions of the ARVN 25th Division at Trang Bam and Cu Chi were heavily shelled by the artillery of the PAVN 1 SAC, including this BM-21 MRL. This rocket launcher system entered service with the North Vietnamese in 1974. (PAVN)

A PAVN BTR-40A armoured reconnaissance car of the 202nd Armoured Brigade engaging with its twin ZPU-2 14.5mm twin machine guns during the fighting around Tay Ninh on 28 April. (PAVN)

unit. Despite that setback, the defenders at Trang Bang continued to resist stubbornly.

Meanwhile, the 320th Division had crossed the Saigon River on a pontoon bridge on 25 April, and was deployed northwest of Dong Du. The Communists managed to drive a wedge between the sectors of Duc Hoa and Hieu Thien and between the latter and Cu Chi. The South Vietnamese launched violent counterattacks which failed. Throughout 28 April and the night that followed, the positions of the 25th Division were shelled by artillery and a multiple rocket launcher regiment. Then, PAVN focused particularly against the position of Dong Du, protected by anti-tank ditches, pillboxes and even a wall of earth more than a meter high. At nightfall, the South Vietnamese retaliated by infiltrating commandos behind enemy lines and countering its artillery fire.

Despite operating now only from two main airbases, the VNAF continued to give effective support to ARVN. The South Vietnamese pilots flew 225 fighter-bomber sorties throughout the fronts on 27 April, notably in support of the ARVN 5th Division. On 28 April, the VNAF flew an additional 51 sorties in support of ground units fighting in the northeast sector. However, the main effort was applied to the southwest sector against the PAVN Group 232. The VNAF flew 193 sorties on this part of the front, in an effort to slow the enemy advance by bombing several bridges. The price for this effort was heavy: from 26 to 28 April, the North Vietnamese shot down 23 aircraft, including two A-1s, three A-37s, three F-5s, one O-1 and 14 UH-1Hs.

6

FREQUENT WIND

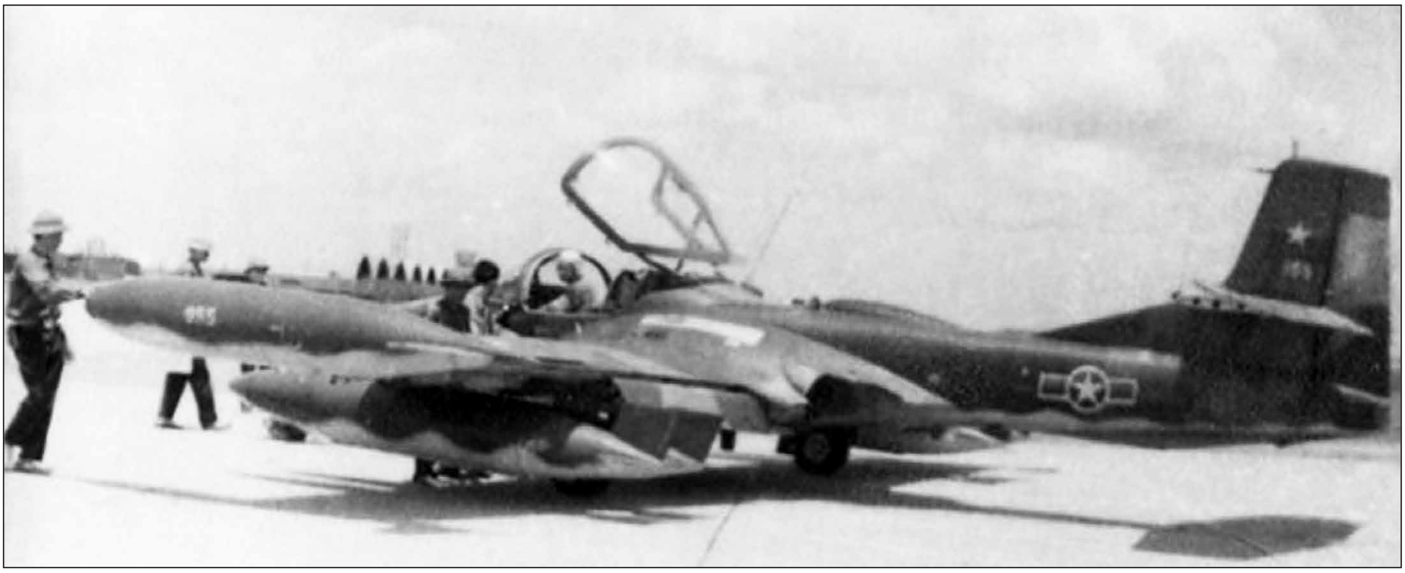
By the evening of 28 April, Dung reassessed the situation. In the last two days, despite a clear North Vietnamese numerical superiority, most of the PAVN attacks had been stopped with only limited gains. Nowhere were the South Vietnamese shown signs of panic or morale collapse, except in the sector of Trang Bang. The fact that ARVN troops continued to fight when the situation appeared hopeless could only surprise Dung. Buu Vien, the Assistant South Vietnamese Minister of Defence for manpower, summed up well the mood of these last days:

> The faith of the Vietnamese people in the United States was so strong that even when the Communists had occupied all the provinces in MR I and II and closed in around Saigon, there were people, including senior officials in the government who still believed that the US would soon react to save Vietnam. They believed that the Americans were being up to something, maybe to lure the Communists into a trap to destroy once and for all their forces. It sounds naïve, but it shows how strong the Vietnamese people's confidence was in the United States.

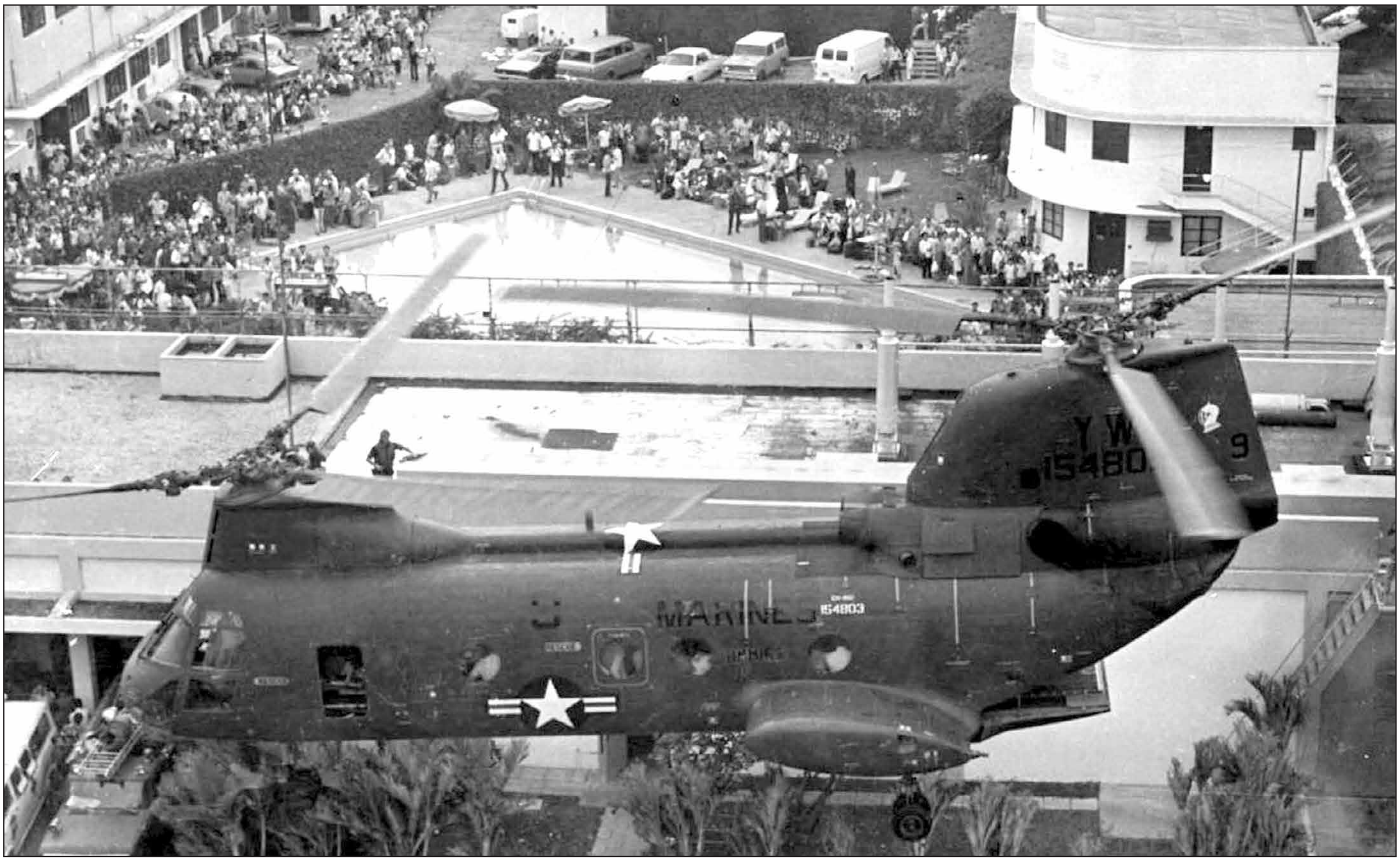
But if in the field the ARVN soldiers continued to fight, Dung counted more on the rapid crumbling of their political and military leadership to overwhelm the last resistance. After Byzantine discussions, Duong Van Minh was finally sworn in as President by both chambers of the parliament on the evening of 28 April, with the avowed purpose to "open negotiations with the other side" for the constitution of a coalition government with the PRG. As answer, Dung unleashed his last surprise to shatter the morale of the South Vietnamese. Until now, the North Vietnamese had not engaged their air force offensively. But on 19 April, Dung issued preliminary orders to the VPAF to participate in the Ho Chi Minh Campaign. The VPAF had already trained for months for that purpose, ready to send in its MiG-17 and MiG-21 fighter-bombers and Il-28 bombers. But Dung feared that the use of Soviet-built aircraft might generate a violent American response. Instead, he ordered the use of captured A-37Bs. On 20 April, five North Vietnamese pilots were sent to Phu Cat AB to be converted from MiG-17F to A-37B. Six days later, the VNAF defector, F-5E pilot Nguyen Thanh Trung, joined the group.

Dung knew that the VPAF strike would be a pinprick, but it might temporarily stun the South Vietnamese at the critical moment and contribute to the collapse of morale. The "determined to win flight" of five A-37Bs, led by defector Trung, took off from Phan Rang at 4:25 p.m., on 28 April. It reached Tan Son Nhut AB shortly after the inaugural speech of the new South Vietnamese president. The strike destroyed three AC-119s, four C-47s, three F-5s, and a CH-47. Several other aircraft were damaged, including a USAF C-130E engaged in evacuation operations. Only 18 of the 58 USAF C-130 sorties scheduled for 28 April could be flown due to the disruption caused by the strike. Despite that inauspicious beginning, Minh immediately sent a letter to US Ambassador Martin asking that all DAO personnel leave Vietnam within 24 hours. Martin complied,

Duong Van Minh was sworn in as the last President of South Vietnam on the evening of 28 April 1975, at the head of a Third Force-Neutralist Government, with the purpose of negotiating a ceasefire and the constitution of a coalition government with the Communists. (NVA)



As an answer to peace negotiations sought by the new Neutralist South Vietnamese Government, Hanoi responded with an air strike carried out against Tan Son Nhut AB (Saigon) by a flight of captured A-37Bs flown by North Vietnamese pilots and led by VNAF defector pilot Nguyen Thanh Trung. One of the aircraft involved is seen here returning from the mission at Phan Rang AB. Note that it was painted with PRG – Viet Cong national markings, instead of the more usual North Vietnamese markings, for propaganda purpose. (VPAF)

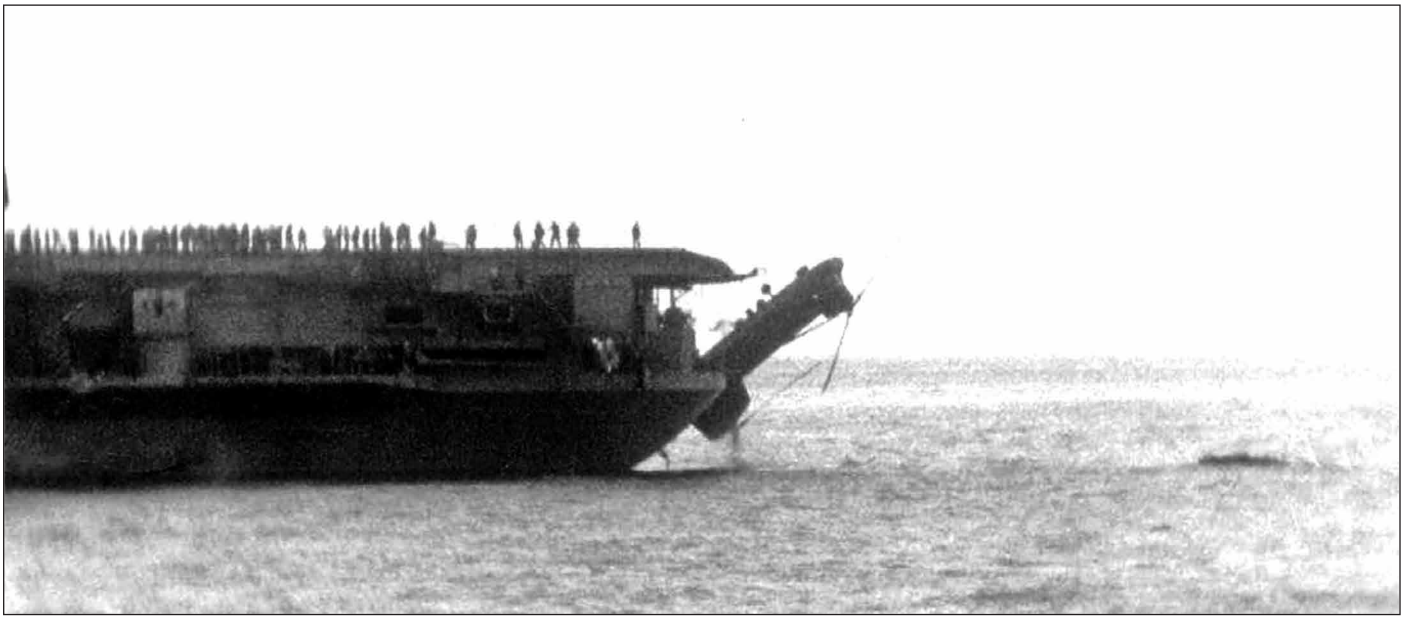


The air strike on Tan Son Nhut AB, followed by its pounding by North Vietnamese artillery forced the Americans to end the fixed-wing aircraft evacuation of refugees and switch to the use of helicopters for the task. A USMC CH-46F of HMM-164 takes off from the compound of the US Embassy in Saigon on 29 April. (USMC)

and soon the remaining DAO staff joined the ongoing evacuation at Tan Son Nhut.

During the night, the 3rd Artillery Battalion, 164th Artillery Brigade of the PAVN 2nd SAC took positions. Its 130mm guns opened fire against Tan Son Nhut AB on 4:30 a.m. on 29 April. It was later joined by a battery of MRLs. A USAF C-130E and a VNAF C-130A were destroyed, the two remaining American Hercules quickly departed during a lull in the shelling. Some rockets also hit the nearby DAO compound, killing two US Marine guards. At 9:00 a.m., Tan Son Nhut AB came under intense shelling for the second time. Damage was heavy, with several A-37Bs and C-130As, loaded with 750lb bombs, destroyed.

During the two previous days, some 12,000 persons were flown out to the Philippines in 46 USAF C-130 sorties and 28 C-141 sorties. However, the increasing AA fire now encountered led to the suspension of the use of the C-141s. It was now hoped that when the new “Neutralist” government would be in place, a ceasefire could be concluded allowing full-scale evacuation to be resumed. Ambassador Graham A. Martin was determined to speed up the evacuation. He insisted that the C-130 air bridge would resume

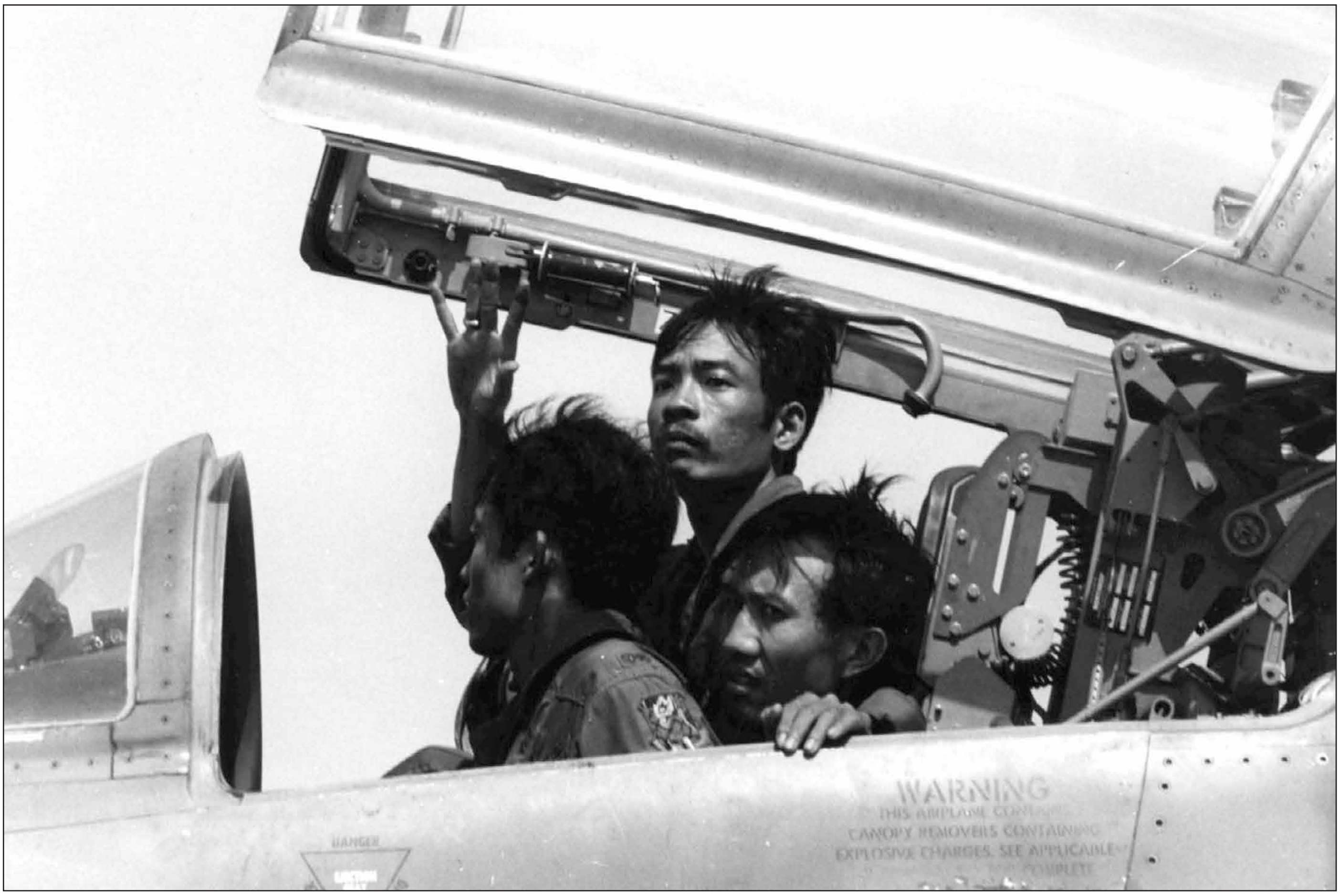


The American evacuations by helicopter gave the signal for many VNAF airmen to fly out and try to land on the various US Navy ships cruising east of Vung Tau. There were so many helicopters arriving that some 45 were dumped into the sea to make room for the others. One was this CH-47A dumped from the carrier USS *Midway*. (US Navy)

as soon as possible despite the precarious situation at Tan Son Nhut AB. The USAF stream of C-130s began arriving at dawn. Sixty sorties were scheduled for 29 April. However, the continuing shelling of the airfield forced Martin to accept the necessity to switch to an evacuation by helicopters operating from aircraft carriers in Operation Frequent Wind. Throughout the day and until the early hours of 30 April, the US helicopters went into action. There were 28 CH-46s and 40 CH-53s of the USMC, alongside 12 USAF HH-53Cs. They were escorted by AH-1J Sea Cobra gunships. While the US military helicopters operated from helipads at the DAO compound and the American embassy, some 30 CIA-operated Air America "airline" Hueys evacuated people from the prepared roofs of 13 buildings throughout Saigon. The whole scheme was protected by USAF fighter-bombers and AC-130s from Thailand, and supported by the carriers USS *Midway* and *Hancock*, as well as the helicopter carrier USS *Okinawa*, forming Task Force 76. Top cover was provided by US Navy F-4s from the USS *Coral Sea* and two squadrons of the new F-14As from the USS *Enterprise*, both of which were assigned to Task Force 77.

The USMC 9th Marine Amphibious Brigade deployed 850 men to secure the different landing zones. Quickly, it turned out that the US Embassy was the safest of the pick-up points. The US State Department got a message from the Soviets that the North Vietnamese troops had received orders to refrain from opening

Some 142 VNAF aircraft also flew out to Thailand during the last two days of the war. This A-37B had landed on a stretch of road in southern Thailand after running out of fuel. (USAF)



This VNAF F-5A landed at U Tapao AB in southern Thailand on 30 April 1975 with no fewer than three pilots crammed into the cockpit, with the ejection seat removed! (USAF)

fire on US aircraft. Two air routes were then defined for helicopters operations. USAF EF-4C "Wild Weasels" kept a constant watch over a new SA-2 battery set up in the vicinity of Bien Hoa. However, on some occasions, Communist AA batteries did fire at American aircraft, though none were hit. A flight of USAF F-4Ds nevertheless attacked a battery of 57mm AA guns.

7

FINAL EFFORT

Meanwhile, the PRG issued a communiqué indicating that it would negotiate with the new Minh government if it did not include people who had collaborated with the former Diem and Thieu regimes. That left no way to any kind of negotiation as most members of the new cabinet had held various official posts throughout the years. The new government was unable to give clear indications of its intended action, apart from ordering the armed forces to "gain time" in order to reach a peaceful solution. For many elements of the South Vietnamese military, the end was now near. Many continued to fight but others did not want to be aligned with a "Neutralist" coalition government that would include the Communists. For many, defeat was imminent, and they did not want to be left trapped when the North Vietnamese took over the whole country. As expected by Dung, the combined military, propaganda, and diplomatic offensive had sowed confusion within the enemy leadership, accelerating its downfall.

The chairman of the ARVN Joint General Staff, Lieutenant General Cao Van Vien resigned and within hours, flew out by helicopter to the US fleet cruising out of Vung Tau. He was soon followed by his deputy, Lieutenant General Dong Van Khuyen. With their departure, the JGS crumbled. President Minh then appointed former II Corps commander, Lieutenant General Vinh Loc, to reconstitute the military high command on 29 April. He was not a particularly competent general, and he had been sacked from its command after the Tet 1968 offensive. Stripped of most of the JGS leadership who had deserted, Loc could not really grasp the whole situation and even less command the remaining units. Minh ordered him to hold for two more days to negotiate a ceasefire, and also nominated retired Brigadier General Nguyen Huu Hanh as Loc's deputy. Reputedly close to the "Neutralists", he was in fact a Communist agent. It was the second masterstroke by the PAVN intelligence during the campaign. During the last hours of South Vietnam, he ordered a series of withdrawals and that no bridge could be destroyed without the JGS approval, accelerating the ARVN's crumbling.

Troops of the PAVN 320th Division pose with captured 105mm howitzers at Dong Du after crushing what remained of the ARVN 25th Division. (PAVN)

A captured M41 of the PAVN 1st Armoured Battalion, 273rd Armoured Regiment, attacking the ARVN 25th Division Headquarters at Cu Chi on 29 April. (PAVN)

Worse, the very man who had until now held together the ARVN forces around Saigon, the III Corps CO, Lieutenant General Nguyen Van Toan, also left for the US fleet at noon on the same day. The VNAF Commander, Lieutenant General Tran Van Minh, was also evacuated by the Americans. One of his last orders called upon his wing and squadron commanders to fly out of the country. He was approached by the special emissary of the US Defence Department, Von Marbod, who tell him to evacuate towards Thailand the maximum possible number of aircraft. A special emphasis was put on the evacuation of the brand-new F-5Es. However, due to the general chaotic conditions, these informal orders did not reach all of the units. However, if many pilots tried to extricate themselves and their families, others continued to fly combat missions until the end.

The VNN Commander, Admiral Chung Tan Cang, went to see President Minh at around noon of 29 April with some representatives of the Hoa Hao and Cao Dai religious sects. He urged him to move the government to Can Tho in the Mekong Delta where the IV Corps Commander, Major General Nguyen Khoa Nam, still had the situation under control by implementing Operation Linking Hands. Minh demurred so Canh returned to his headquarters to organise the evacuation of part of the VNN, including the Sea Fleet, towards the Philippines.

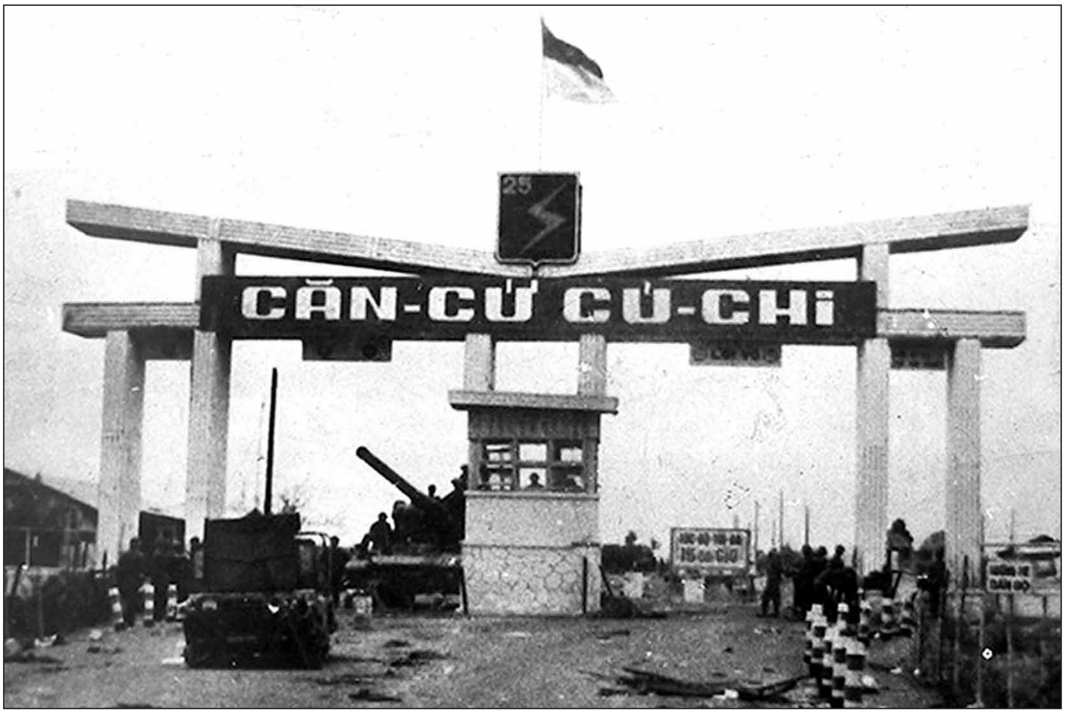
On 29 April, Dung renewed his offensive. The northern front was the first to crack up. The PAVN 312th Division, after two days of trying to capture the Phu Loi crossroads, attacked again after an intense artillery preparation. The ARVN 5th Division tried to withdraw, each regiment trying its luck separately, suffering terrible losses. At dawn, what remained of the division entrenched themselves between Tan Uyen and Vinh Binh, 25km northwest of Bien Hoa, in an attempt to stop the advance of the 1st SAC. The 312th Division then seized Binh Duong, before moving north to attack the positions of Ben Cat and Lai Khe from the rear.

On the north-western front, PAVN attacked again on 29 April at 5:00 a.m. with the 320th Division and the 3rd Armoured Battalion on the northwest and southwest flanks of Dong Du. An armoured column attacking through the main gate of the entrenched camp was stopped, two burning tanks blocking the entrance. Each penetration of the perimeter was pushed back. The T-54s destroyed two M48s which supported a counterattack. It was not until around 10:00 a.m. that the North Vietnamese tanks managed to seize the runway defended by a troop of M41s. A group of T-54s also captured the main artillery position, capturing 17 artillery pieces, including three M107 175mm SP guns. Meanwhile, the 316th Division finally captured Go Dau Ha taking 1,424 prisoners, knocking out 13 howitzers and 11 armoured vehicles. The ARVN 25th Division CO, Brigadier General Ly Tong Ba, was captured thereafter.

Meanwhile, the 10th Division bypassed Cu Chi and began its dash for Saigon on the night of 28 April. The 198th Assault Sapper Regiment first needed to seize the Bong Bridge on Route 1 and the Sang Bridge on Route 15. The Dac Congs had only one day to prepare for the operation. If they failed, the entire 10th Division could be surprised at dawn by the enemy artillery and air force. It was the riskiest manoeuvre of the entire campaign. After several hours of fighting and a difficult approach, they were definitely masters of the bridges. The 10th Division then set off with two "penetration groups". The first, on Route 1, included the 24th Infantry Regiment on trucks, an artillery battalion with 76.2mm and 85mm guns, eight 37mm AA guns, 16 T-54s, nine PT-76s and 10 K-63s of the 1st Armoured Battalion. In order to surprise the enemy, the five

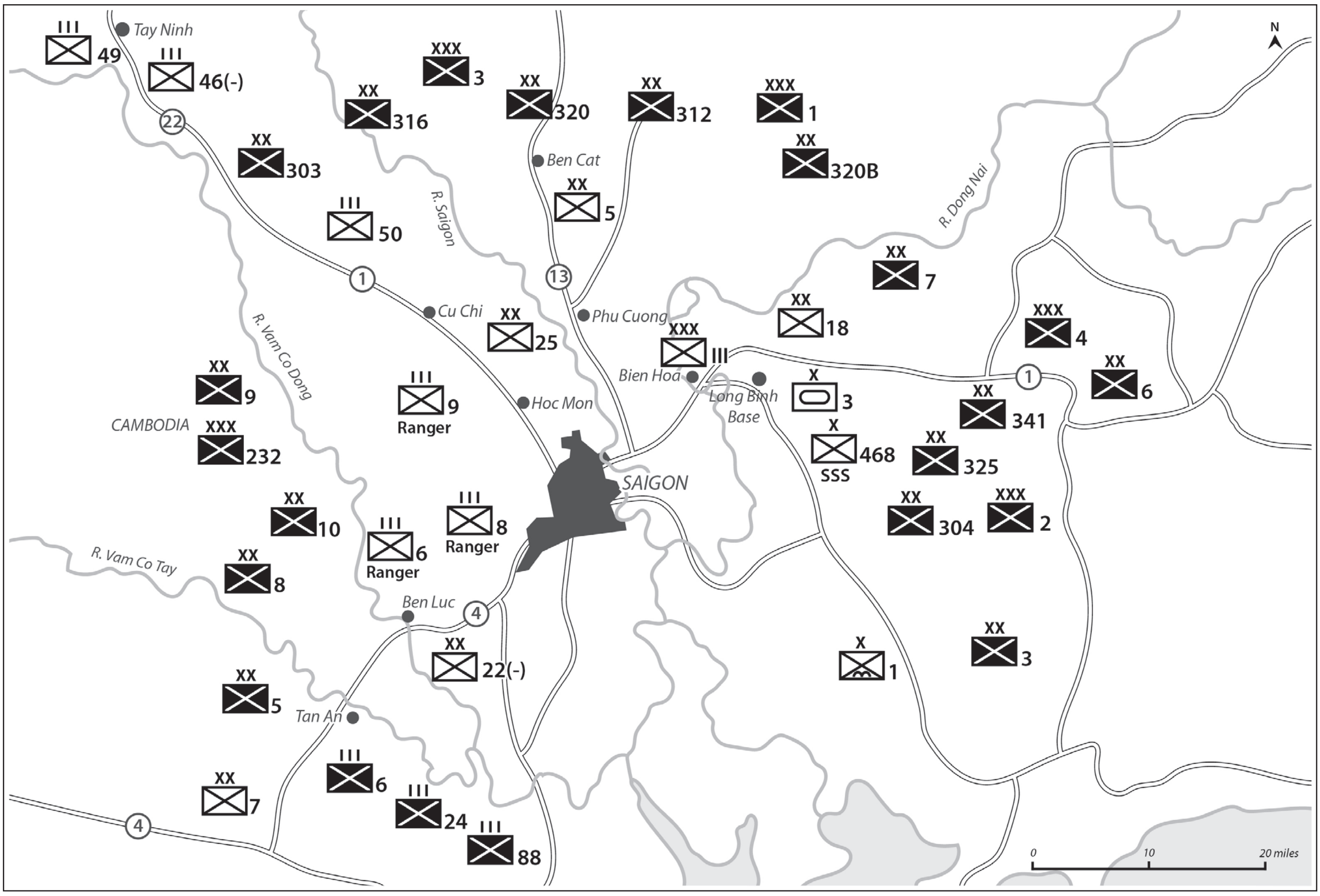
M41 tanks captured at Phu Loi were placed in the lead. The second "penetration group" drove down Route 15 with the 28th Regiment on trucks, anti-aircraft guns, an artillery battalion, 11 T-54s and 12 K-63s of the 2nd Armoured Battalion. The ruse worked. The M41s entered Cu Chi without resistance and were happily greeted by ARVN troops who were then massacred, realising their mistake too late. The columns then resumed their advance, the 9th Company of the 273rd Armoured Regiment in the lead, rushing towards the Bong Bridge. The Dac Congs had just been driven back by a counterattack but the arrival of the T-54s turned the situation around. Once the bridge was definitely secured, the tankers suddenly bumped into an ARVN column of 22 M113s in the process of falling back. The T-54s immediately engaged them, destroying 11 APCs, with tank number 021 claiming seven on its own. The other M113s became stuck in the surrounding rice fields. The two "penetrations groups" then faced a series of ARVN roadblocks in their progression. The 9th Tank Company thus came up against two M113s and RFs. The two APCs were quickly dispatched, though the infantry then threw themselves on the T-54s and tried to throw grenades through the hatches but were machinegunned down. After occupying Hoc Mon, the tanks rushed towards the ARVN National Training Center in Quang Trung. The T-54s destroyed the defensive fortifications at close range, clearing the way for the infantry.

At nightfall, the first penetration group finally reached the northwest perimeter of Tan Son Nhut AB at the Ba Queo crossroads, but a reconnaissance group was stopped dead by the 3rd Airborne Battalion which destroyed three K-63s. For its part, the second penetration group tried to bypass the air base from the north. It reached the Sang Bridge, 15km away. When the third T-54 crossed it, the South Vietnamese set off explosive charges that caused it to collapse. The armoured task force then turned around, took Route 8 to Cu Chi, and then joined Route 1, but the vehicles, harassed by enemy artillery, became lost. Four BTR-40s were sent in front to find the right route but were destroyed



The ARVN 25th Division Headquarters at Cu Chi was taken by the PAVN 10th Division on 29 April, opening the way for a deep-penetration attack along Route 15 towards Tan Son Nhut AB. (PAVN)

After advancing fairly quickly on 29 April, the two motorised task forces of the PAVN were stopped by nightfall in the vicinity of the Tan Son Nhut AB by fierce ARVN resistance. This column of vehicles, led by two Chinese-built BJ-312 command cars, prepared to resume its advance the next morning. (PAVN)


N
Tay Ninh
III 49
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R. Saigon
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Cu Chi
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Phu Cuong
XX 18
XXX 4
R. Vam Co Dong
XXX III
Bien Hoa
1
XX 6
XX 9
III 9 Ranger
Hoc Mon
Long Binh Base
X 3
XX 341
CAMBODIA
XXX 232
X 468 SSS
XX 325
SAIGON
XX 10
III 8 Ranger
XX 304
XXX 2
R. Vam Co Tay
III 6 Ranger
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Tan An
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20 miles

Map 5: Saigon's Defences. (Map by George Anderson)

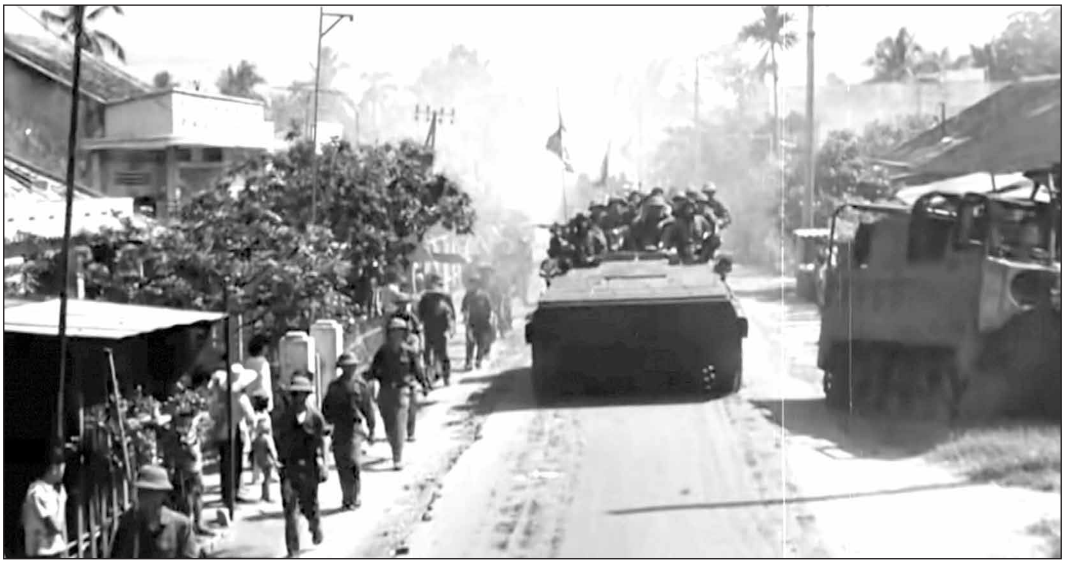
BINH DUONG
MY THO
VINH LONG
SAI GON

The 303rd Division attacked Khiem Cuong at dawn of 29 April, resuming the advance of Group 232 along Route 4. Most of the vehicles here are captured M35 trucks. (PAVN)

in an ambush. Cautiously, the 10th Division Commander stopped for the night.

On the southern front, the 303rd Division attacked Khiem Cuong at dawn of 29 April, defended by a battalion of Rangers and a troop of 15 M113s. The latter launched a suicidal charge to oppose the PT-76 and Type 63 tanks, with most of the APCs destroyed. Then, at 8:30 a.m., it was the turn of the Type 63s, M113s and BTR-50s of the PAVN 8th and 33rd Armoured Companies to attack. Despite strong resistance, the position was conquered by 10:45 a.m. Under the powerful battering unleashed by Group 232, the RFs began to disband along the Vam Co Dong River. The advance was resumed by the PAVN 9th Division, supported by three armoured battalions. At the head of the penetration group were the Type 63s of the 6th Tank Company which set off from Giong Sen. At the Kenh Song Bridge, the first tank crossed over but the weakened structure collapsed. The remaining Type 63s traversed the Vam Co Dong in amphibious mode amid enemy artillery fire. The troops crossed on requisitioned sampans, barges and BAV-485 amphibious trucks. The engineers then threw in a floating bridge allowing the rest of the 9th Division to race towards Vinh Loc, the Phu Lam radar station, finally reaching the southern outskirts of Saigon by nightfall of 29 April. Simultaneously, the 9th Division sent another penetration group to the Bay Hien junction to link up with the forces of the 3rd SAC. Led by the 3rd Tank Company, the column moved up Route 9A, overwhelming resisting Rangers around Vinh Loc, before stopping in the early morning hours of 30 April near Tan Son Nhut.

The most intense fighting still took place in the eastern sector around Ho Nai where the South Vietnamese pulled back on the night of 28 April. Reacting immediately to the withdrawal of the 6th Marine Battalion, the PAVN 7th Division attacked but when the first tanks entered the city around midnight, they encountered fierce resistance from the enemy militias. Several T-54s were destroyed by M72 fire. An attempt to overrun Bien Hoa AB by the 341st Division also failed but four M48s were destroyed by the T-54s. The ARVN blew up the Buong Bridge, forcing the 7th Division of the 4th SAC to turn back, bypassing Bien Hoa, to join the 2nd SAC in the east



The PAVN 9th Division resumed its advance on 29 April against the Saigon south-western defence perimeter. A K-63 APC passed by a destroyed ARVN M548. (PAVN)

The North Vietnamese also resumed their attack against Saigon's eastern perimeter on 29 April, with troops of the 7th Division preparing to attack along Route 1 with the support of the T-54s of the 26th Armoured Group. (PAVN)

The PAVN 341st Division also tried unsuccessfully to capture Bien Hoa AB, with the support of the tanks of the 26th Armoured Group. (PAVN)

When the North Vietnamese reinforced the attack against Bien Hoa AB with the 203rd Armoured Brigade, the ARVN III Corps reacted by sending there the 3rd Armoured Brigade, which arrived in due time to spoil the enemy offensive. (US Army)

of the city. From now on, it was up to the 2nd SAC to take the lead in the breakthrough towards the capital. Its 203rd Armoured Brigade finally crossed the Buong River on a floating bridge and in turn tried to take the Bien Hoa lock by the evening but the ARVN TF-315 and TF-322, supported by part of the elite 81st Airborne Ranger Group, repelled the attack, claiming a half dozen T-54s. Around 3:00 a.m., a new assault was launched but the South Vietnamese tankers stopped it, enveloped the left flank of the enemy column, and inflicted heavy losses on it. In all, about 15 T-54s and Type 63s as well as trucks were destroyed. At dawn, Bien Hoa was still in ARVN hands.

Meanwhile, the 341st Division pressed on its attacks against the 18th Division entrenched in Long Binh. The PAVN engineers had to fill-in anti-tank ditches and remove concrete blocks under enemy fire. A first assault was pushed back, several T-54s were hit against four M113s destroyed but by the evening, the JGS ordered to the 18th Division, as well as to the 258th and 468th Marine Brigades, to retreat to the west bank of the Dong Nai River. These incomprehensible

ARVN counterattacked vigorously with TF-315 and TF-322 and blocked the PAVN 341st Division on the outskirt of Bien Hoa. (ARVN)

Despite most of its airbases now being under enemy artillery fire, VNAF continued to provide close air support to ARVN until the end. The situation now became so desperate that even AC-119 gunships were engaged in daylight missions but suffered heavy losses accordingly. This AC-119K of 821st Attack Squadron was one of the two shot down on 29 April. A third was brought down the next day. (PAVN)

Unable to capture Bien Hoa, the 4th SAC had to hand over the lead in the breakthrough in the eastern sector towards Saigon to the 2nd SAC. Standing, first from left, Major General Hoang The Thien, the 4th SAC Political Commissar, with beside him the Corps commander, Major General Hoang Cam. (PAVN)

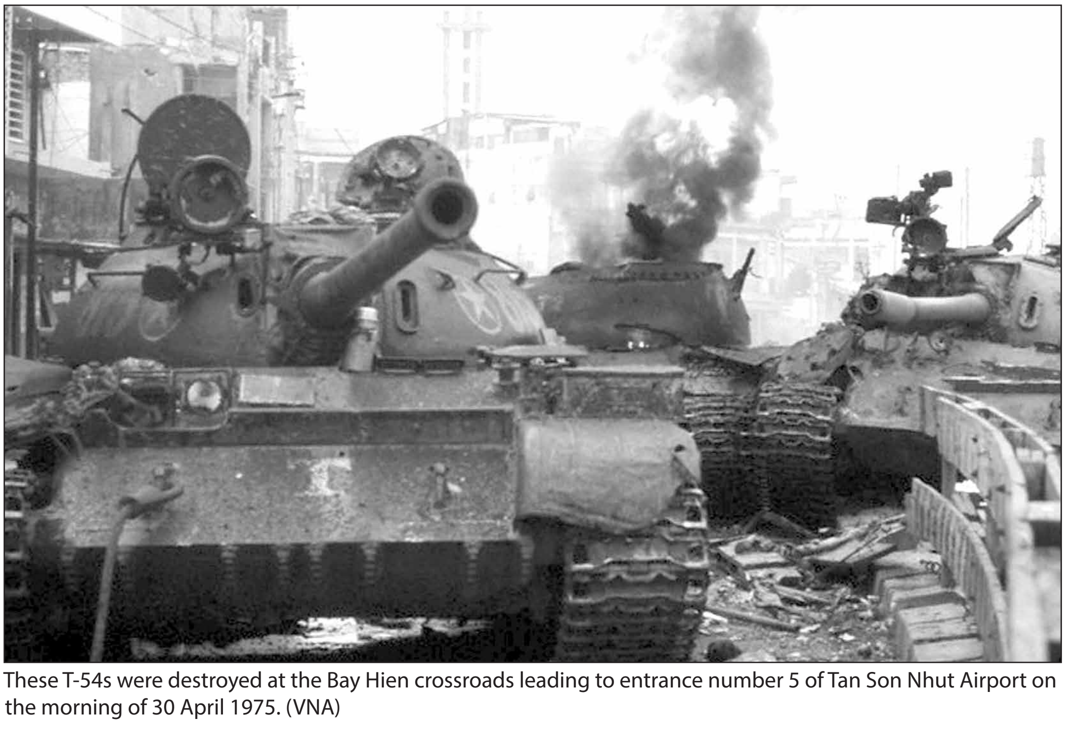
orders completely destabilised the ARVN defences along Saigon's eastern side. Not wanting to be isolated, the 3rd Armoured Brigade also pulled back towards Saigon at daybreak. Other directives forbade the destruction of bridges unless ordered so. PAVN columns surged forwards but Dung's troops mostly halted their advance towards Saigon for regrouping and resupplying during the night of 29 to 30 April.

Disrupted by the shelling of Tan Son Nhut AB, as well as by the first departures of aircraft for Thailand, the VNAF flew only around 40 tactical sorties on 29 April in support of the Saigon battle. The PAVN claimed an additional F-5, one A-1, two AC-119s, two O-1s, two UH-1Hs, and one CH-47A. In the Mekong Delta, PAVN also launched a series of attacks to tie in place the local ARVN forces but carried out with depleted local forces, most of them were brushed aside by PF troops of the An Xuyen and Ba Xuyen Provinces. Particularly targeted was Can Tho, attacked by the PAVN 4th Division and elements of the 8th Division, in order to disrupt any plan to move the South Vietnamese government there. The ARVN 21st Division of Brigadier General Mach Van Truong repelled an enemy assault across the Cau Nhiem River, attempting to reach the Arc Road line and strike directly at Binh Thuy (Tra Noc) AB. Throughout the night, the ARVN troops were ably supported by VNAF helicopter gunships. The defenders fought back fiercely and held the defence line until morning so they could launch a counterattack. The North Vietnamese were forced to retreat, but they continued to hold roadblocks along Route 4.

Meanwhile, the Americans were concluding their evacuation operations. Ambassador Graham Martin left on a CH-46 at 4:58 a.m., and the last helicopter evacuated the remaining Marine security guards at 7:53 a.m., 30 April, from the embassy roof. With the US Navy fleet now departing the Vietnamese waters, VNAF helicopters loaded with refugees swarmed in, trying to catch up. A total of 50,493 people were evacuated during the fixed-wing evacuations, with an additional 1,373 Americans and 5,595 South Vietnamese and third nationals in 638 helicopter sorties. This was achieved with only minimal losses, one A-7E, one AH-1J and one CH-46F, all lost due to accidents.

By dawn of 30 April 1975, the PAVN 10th Division mounted on the armour of the 273rd Armoured Regiment resumed its attack against Tan Son Nhut AB. (PAVN)

The two deep-penetration groups of the PAVN 10th Division were accompanied by an anti-aircraft artillery battalion each, like this unit with 37mm AA guns. (PAVN)

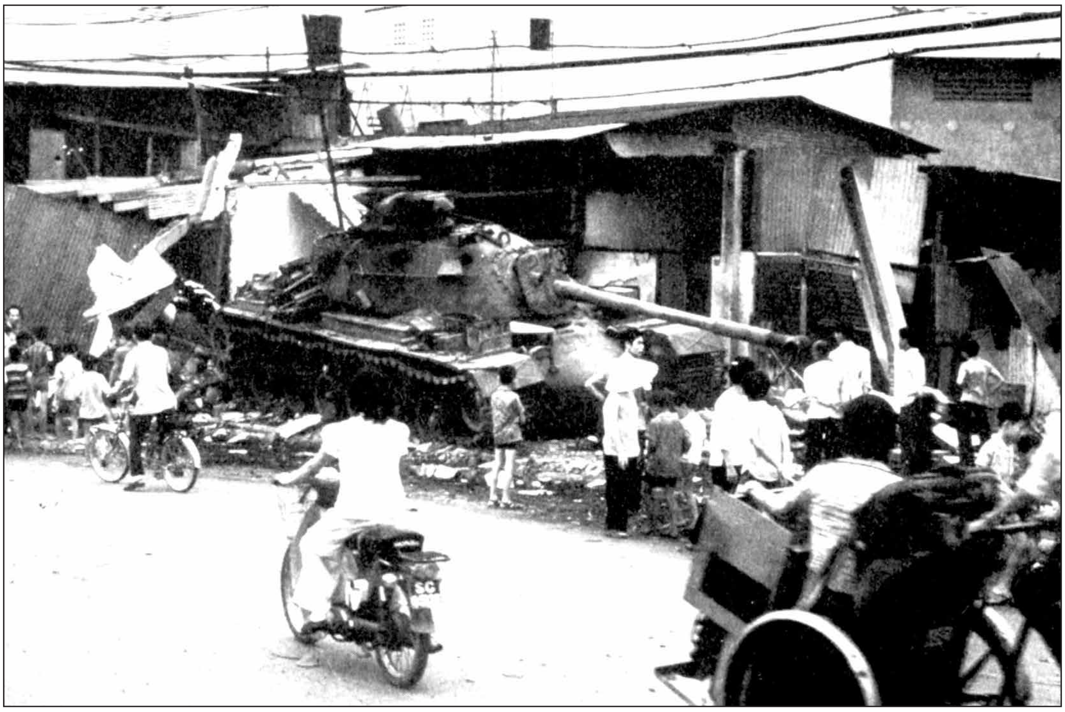


These T-54s were destroyed at the Bay Hien crossroads leading to entrance number 5 of Tan Son Nhut Airport on the morning of 30 April 1975. (VNA)

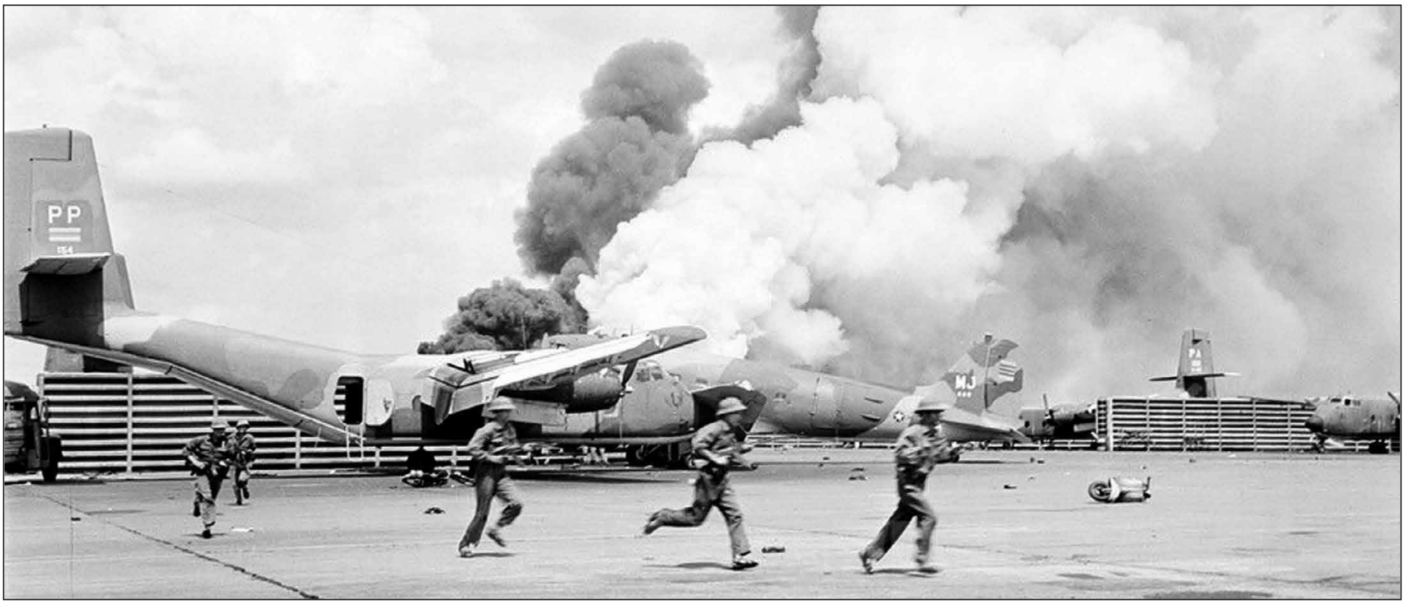
Dung resumed the march against Saigon at dawn of 30 April. By early morning, the South Vietnamese emissaries were turned down by PRG representatives who presented them an outright capitulation order, with the dissolution of both South Vietnam's armed forces as well as administrative structures. The new JGS CO, Lieutenant General Vinh Loc, who went to see President Minh, estimated that the situation was desperate. He moved to the Navy quay and boarded one of the last ships leaving. President Minh acquiesced to the North Vietnamese dictate in order to save Saigon from destruction. He prepared an unconditional capitulation proclamation that was aired on the radio by 10:15 a.m. While most of the ARVN units laid down their weapons, due to communication difficulties and the vacant staff, others had not clearly received the instruction. Some others refused to comply and continued to fight.

The PAVN 10th Division resumed its attack at 7:15 a.m. against Tan Son Nhut AB. Despite the chaotic situation there, the VNAF continued to fly missions. The situation now was so desperate that even AC-119 gunships were launched for day sorties. The first penetration group rushed ahead, but the column of more than 400 vehicles was repeatedly attacked by VNAF. Between two air strikes, the 24th Regiment bypassed the Ba Queo junction before heading towards the Bay Hien crossroads which gave direct access to entrance number 5 of the airport. The 3rd Airborne Battalion with part of the 81st Airborne Ranger Group, and a troop of M48s, were deployed across the main avenue and in the adjacent streets. The leading T-54 was destroyed by a recoilless 90mm gun. The next tank was destroyed at point blank range by a Patton and accompanying PAVN infantry mounted on the tanks were wiped out by machinegun fire. The T-54s continued to press on. The tank of Company Commander Nguyen Xuan Truong turned into a torch after being pierced by several shots from the M48s. In the narrow streets, T-54 and Patton clashed at close range. T-54 number 985 was damaged by enemy fire, its gun out of service. Suddenly, at a bend in a street, an M48 appeared. The T-54's commander, Sergeant Mai Trong Hoat, without hesitation, rushed at him and the T-54 slammed into the Patton, knocking it against a wall. The concussed South Vietnamese crew was taken prisoner. Tanks from the 7th and 8th Companies were now deploying as reinforcements and supporting the infantry, which after an hour and a half of fierce hand-to-hand combats had finally been able to seize the crossroads. Another battalion then walked down the main street of the Long Cha Ca District towards the entrance to the air base. The first three T-54s that supported it were destroyed by the Airborne Rangers with M72s. The Communists then deployed a battery of 85mm anti-aircraft guns to destroy the blockhouses in direct fire. A group of Airborne Rangers sneaked up from behind and blew up a gun. A second battalion and eight additional T-54s were sent in as reinforcements but as they reached the Bay Hien crossroads, they were attacked by VNAF which destroyed a dozen trucks and two tanks. The remaining T-54s charged, without accompanying infantry. They slowed down in front of the three still burning T-54s outside the base entrance and the Airborne Rangers immobilised two of them with M72 rockets. In one of the damaged tanks, gunner Nguyen Tran Doan continued to fire his 100mm cannon, covering a third T-54 which tried to bypass. The Airborne Rangers knocked it out with several rockets, shouting "remember Phuoc Long"! In the meantime, the North Vietnamese positioned other 85mm anti-aircraft guns which engaged the casemates and machine gun nests. The Airborne troops bowed stoically. It was with despair that they learned of the order to surrender. Some refused and continued to fight, and officers committed suicide with grenades. At 11:30 a.m., the North Vietnamese tanks finally entered the air base.

On the northern front, the 312th Division attacked the remnants of the ARVN 5th Division entrenched at Lai Khe. A convoy of 36 trucks that tried to pull out was captured with 1,200 troops along Route 14. By midday, Lai Khe was taken, the commander of the 5th Division, Brigadier General Le Nguyen Vy, committed suicide. It took six hours of fierce fighting for the 320B Division, and several tanks destroyed, to finally clear Route 16 towards Saigon on the morning of 30 April. At Lai Thieu, a company of T-54s destroyed



An ARVN M48 of the 3rd Armoured Brigade destroyed by North Vietnamese T-54s while defending the access to the Tan Son Nhut AB. (PAVN)



At 11:30 a.m., the North Vietnamese 10th Division finally entered Tan Son Nhut AB after a hard fight with the ARVN 3rd Airborne Battalion with part of the 81st Airborne Ranger Group. (PAVN)

On 30 April, the ARVN northern defence perimeter of Saigon was also crumbling under the attacks of the PAVN 312th Division along Route 14 with the support of the T-54s of the 202 Armoured Brigade. (PAVN)

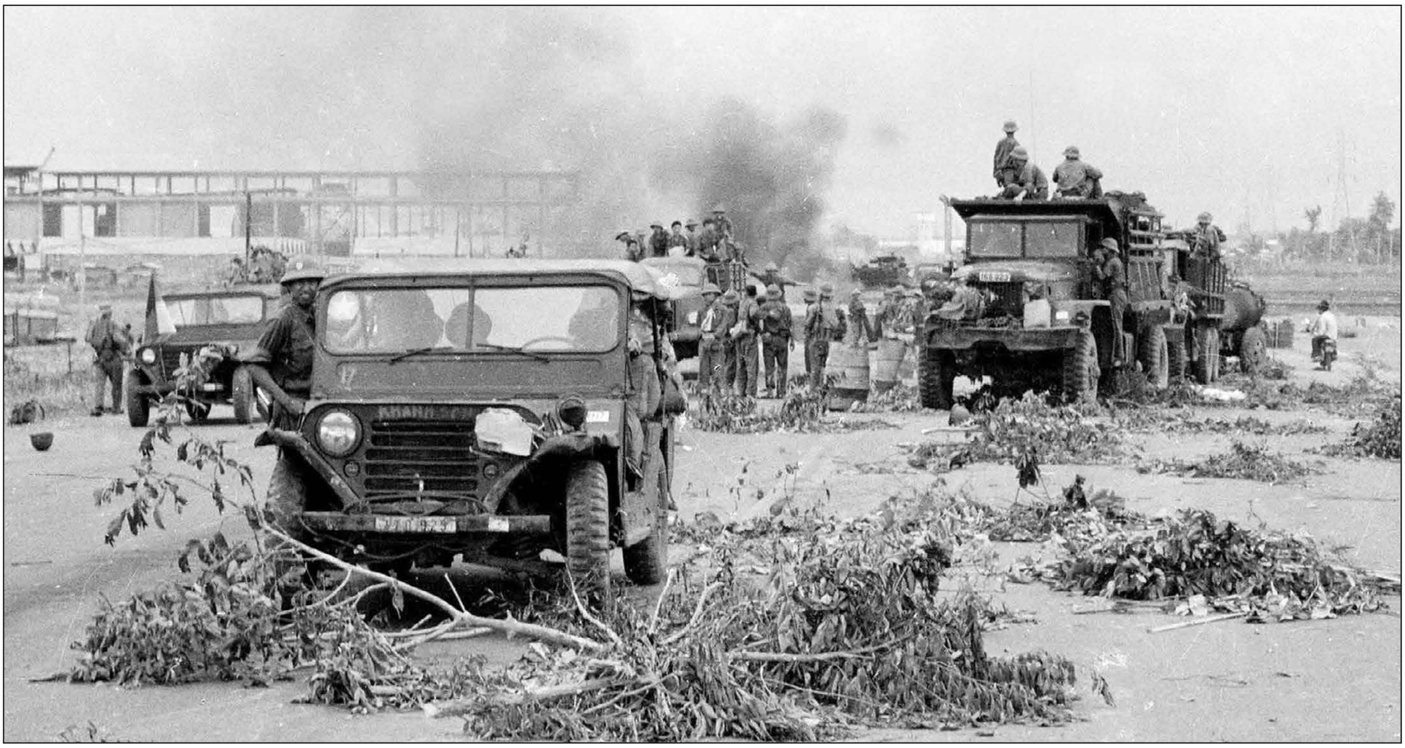
The 1st SAC 'penetration group' finally captured the ARVN Joint General Staff Building by midday of 30 April 1975. (VNA)

a column of 11 M113s which tried to retreat. The 320B Division was however stopped at the Vinh Binh Bridge, blocked by obstacles made up of concrete-filled drums. The 3rd Company Commander, Captain Hoang Tho Mac, jumped from his T-54 to coordinate the attack with the infantry. He was wounded a first time but continued to lead, hiding behind an immobilised tank. Wounded a second time, he refused to be evacuated, protecting himself with another wounded soldier. At 9:00 a.m., 10 T-54s crushed the last defenders and crossed the bridge. Meanwhile, the 1st SAC penetration group finally reached the outskirts of Go Vap and Gia Dinh, with the South Vietnamese General Staff as their objective but its progress was stopped at the Binh Trieu Bridge by the tankers of the ARVN 3rd Armoured Brigade. After 30 minutes of skirmishes, the T-54s resumed their advance after destroying four M48s and some trucks. The North Vietnamese also put into service two M48s, three M41s, one M42, and three M113s found abandoned intact. They then captured Go Vap and entered Saigon to join forces with those of the 3rd SAC and to attack the ARVN Armoured Corps HQ.

Group 232 also resumed its attacks by the morning of 30 April, its 9th Division continued its advance by daybreak along Route 4, capturing the ARVN Capital Special Military Region Headquarters. The PAVN 5th Division, meanwhile, attacked Tan An city and Thu Thua, destroying what remained of the ARVN 22nd Division and 6th Ranger Group. Opening the way for Group 232 were the Type 63s of the 5th Tank Company, along with the 24th and 28th Regiments of the 9th Division, as well as the 429th Assault Sapper Regiment. The task force's mission was to attack the VNN Headquarters, as well as the Nha Be petroleum storage facility. It finally entered Saigon via Le Van Duyet Avenue, encountering only sporadic resistance. It faced stronger resistance at the National Police Headquarters, losing several tanks, before seizing it around noon.

The 2nd SAC penetration group set off on the Bien Hoa highway at 4:00 a.m., 30 April, with the Presidential Palace as its objective. It was organised around the 203rd Armoured Brigade, the 66th Regiment of 304th Division, an artillery battalion with D-44 85mm guns, a 37mm anti-aircraft battalion, and with the 18th Regiment, 325th Division in reserve. It was followed in the second echelon by the penetration group of the 4th SAC. The vanguard of 400 vehicles reached the bridge over the Dong Nai River an hour later. At 6:00 a.m., the column moved on again after brushing aside some ARVN troops and bumped up against a new roadblock at the Thu Duc Reserve Officers School where a company of cadets, some in parade uniforms, confronted the enemy tanks. A first assault of 10 T-54s was repulsed, several were destroyed at close range by LAW rockets. A new attack failed again but several M113s which came to the rescue were destroyed. Finally, after an hour of fierce fighting, a company of T-54s was dispatched to take the main position from the rear and literally crushed the defenders when tank number 707 of Sergeant Tran Quang Nhan ran over the last blockhouse held by the cadets.

Fearing to be outpaced by the forces of Lieutenant General Tran Van Tra, Lieutenant General Le Tron Tan was furious with the commander of the 2nd SAC for this setback at Thu Duc which delayed him in his race towards the Presidential Palace against his rival. But his tanks were again stopped at the Rach Chiec Bridge by some M113s armed with TOW missiles. They eventually seized the



The 2nd SAC penetration group set off on the Bien Hoa Highway at 4:00 a.m., 30 April, with the Presidential Palace as its objective. Leading it was the PAVN 66th Regiment of 304th Division. Most of its vehicles were captured American built trucks and jeeps. (PAVN)

Spearheading the 2nd SAC penetration group was the armour of the 203rd Armoured Brigade, like these Type 63 light tanks and K-63 APC. (PAVN)

bridge with the support of a Dac Cong battalion. At around 8:00 a.m. the column then reached the New Port Bridge, 986m long, and defended by the 12th Airborne Battalion. The paratroopers had already repelled several assaults by the Dac Congs, supported by helicopter gunships and some V100s and M41s. The first three T-54s were destroyed by M41 fire and South Vietnamese artillery then opened fire with fused shells that exploded from above, shedding shrapnel on the vehicles. The column was then attacked by VNAF. Another assault was pushed back, supported by VNN river gunboats engaging the T-54s with their 40mm Bofors guns. The North Vietnamese deployed their 85mm guns on the other side of the river and destroyed several M41s in their protected pens. For an hour, the paratroopers stubbornly resisted then suddenly pulled back. In fact, they were just complying with the surrender order of President Minh. Fortunately, they did not detonate the two tons of explosives placed under the bridge.

At 10:30 am, the tanks of the PAVN 203rd Armoured Brigade began to cross the massive structure, then destroyed two other M41s at the next Thi Nghe Bridge. The T-54s were then engaged with 12.7mm machine guns by two M113s. The political commissar of the 4th Tank Company, Vu Dan Toan, dispatched them in quick succession. The crew of a nearby V100 abandoned their vehicle and ran away. From that moment, the 203rd Armoured Brigade entered Saigon, splitting into two groups. A column went up Avenue Thon Nhut, the other took Hong Thap Tu Avenue. On the latter, the leading company was fired at by two M41s in ambush at a crossroads. They

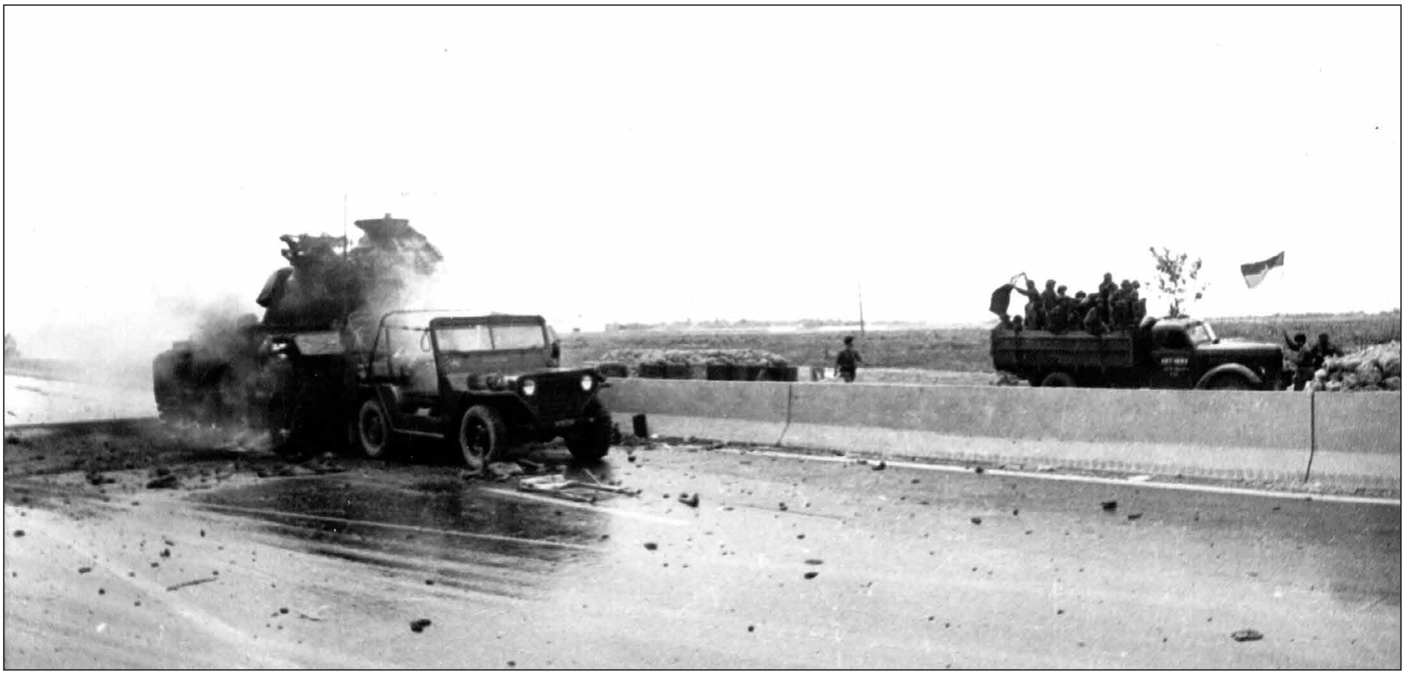
The first obstacle for the 2nd SAC penetration group to overcome was the ARVN Thu Duc Reserve Officers School where a company of cadets fought until annihilation. After taking the base, the T-54s of the 203rd Armoured Brigade continued towards Saigon. (PAVN)

ĐÀ LẠT 265
LONG KHÁNH
LONG BÌNH

The PAVN 203rd Armoured Brigade continued towards Saigon, surprising an ARVN resupply convoy. (PAVN)

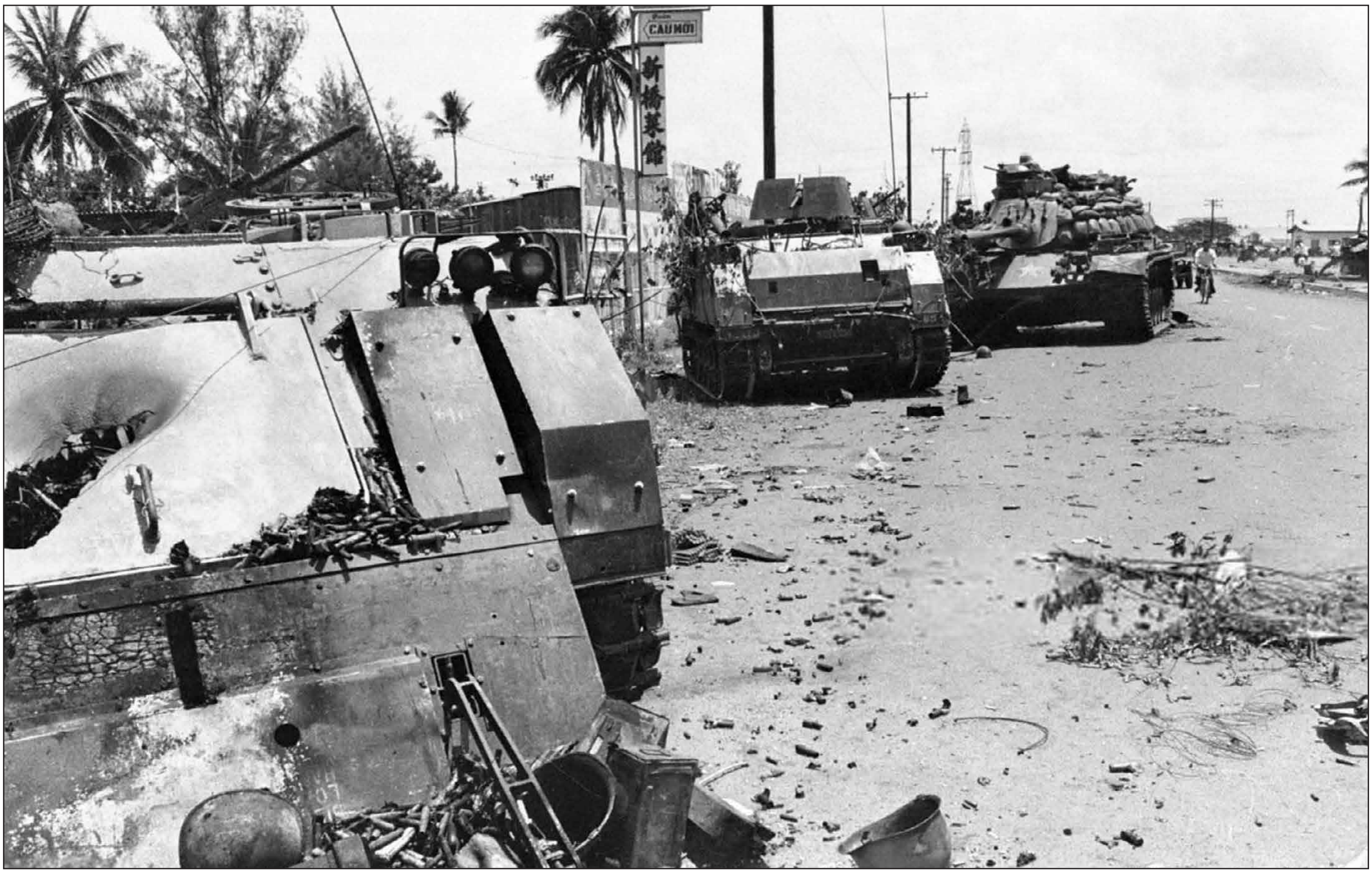
fired shots after shots, causing great confusion but T-54 number 390 knocked out the first enemy tank. The other was set on fire by Captain Bui Quang Than's T-54 number 843. The advance resumed, but the lead tank was now hit by a 66mm LAW rocket fired from the second floor of a building. The other T-54s retorted by firing several shells into the building. At 12:15, they finally reached the Presidential Palace. Tank number 843 of 1st Lt Bui Quang Than, CO of the 4th Tank Company, 4th Tank Battalion, smashed through the wrought iron gate. President Duong Van Minh was taken prisoner and driven to the National Radio Station to repeat the unconditional surrender order. The short-lived in office President Minh probably saved Saigon from further destruction and suffering.

The North Vietnamese had to take in charge a great number of ARVN prisoners. The privates and lower ranks were ordered to strip down to underwear and moved out to their homes. They would be screened later by the troops of the Interior Ministry. The proud commandos of the elite 81st Airborne Ranger Group of Colonel Phan Van Huan refused to shred their uniforms. They walked back towards Saigon from Thu Duc with their commander at the head, shouldering their weapons, lining up four abreast in a column stretching almost a kilometre long in a demonstration of discipline. Civilians lined the road and offered drinks to the soldiers. Soon a Communist officer and troops met Huan on the highway. Huan told the officer his men were prepared to turn over their weapons, but they would not undress. If ordered to do so, they would refuse, and a firefight would break out. The Communist officer relented, and the Airborne Rangers stacked their arms and dispersed. It was the final unit in Saigon to lay down its weapons.

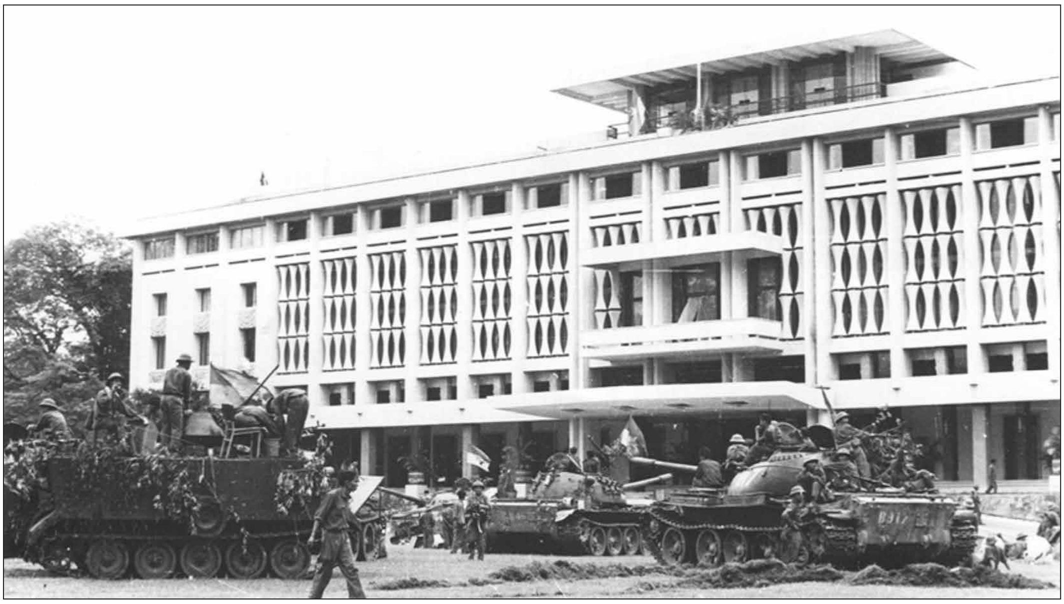


The ARVN 3rd Armoured Brigade was deployed along the "Korean Highway" (built by a South Korean engineering company) in a series of roadblocks, trying to slow down the advance of the PAVN 2nd SAC against Saigon's eastern defence perimeter. This ARVN M48, as well as an M151 Jeep, were destroyed by the PAVN 325th Division. (PAVN)

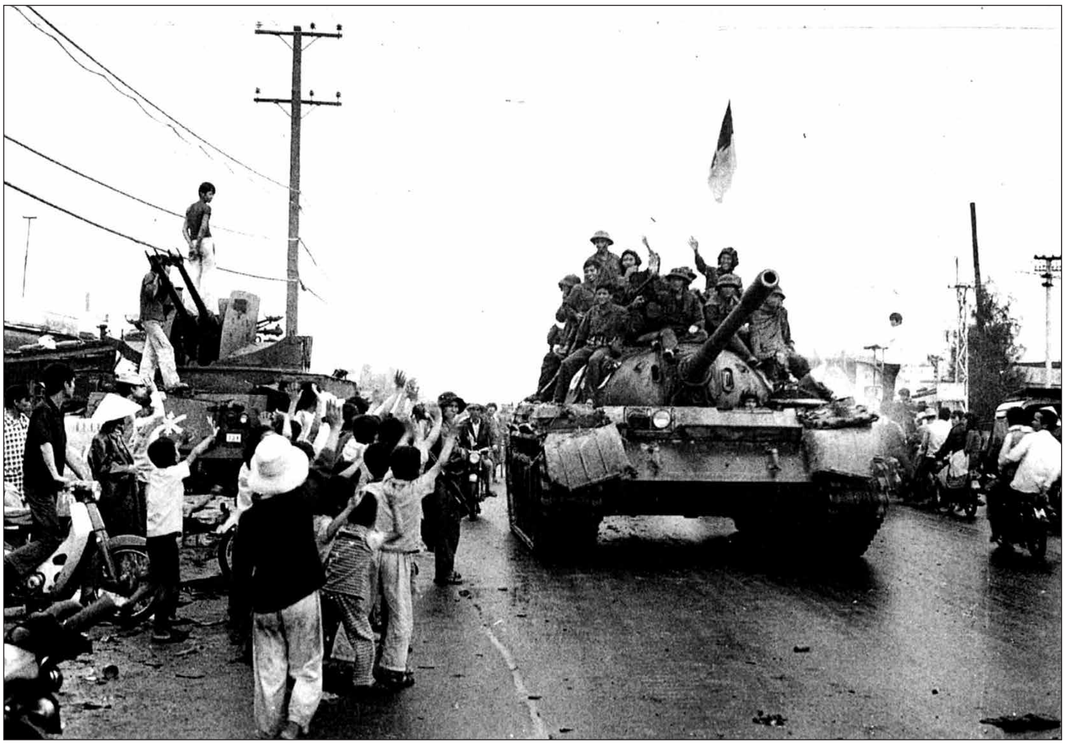
Most Western journalists portrayed ARVN officers as deserting their men in droves. Some, at least 60 senior officers, mostly holding staff positions, fled towards Thailand or onboard US Navy ships. While some younger officers deserted, most mid- and upper-level commanders in the field stayed with their men until the end. For example, not one Ranger Group or battalion commander deserted. Of the senior officers who escaped at the end, Lieutenant General Ngo Quang Truong, former CO of the I Corps, or his deputy, Lieutenant General Lam Quang Thi, for example, were no longer commanding units. Unfortunately, Lieutenant General Nguyen Van Toan, CO III Corps, and some others did desert, leaving an indelible stain on South Vietnam's image. Some chose suicide rather than surrender as was the case for the commanders of the 5th and 7th Divisions, Brigadier General Le Nguyen Vy and Tran Van Hai. Major General Pham Van Phu, the former II Corps commander who oversaw the disastrous retreat from the Central Highlands, also killed himself. Many lower-ranking officers and enlisted soldiers did as well.



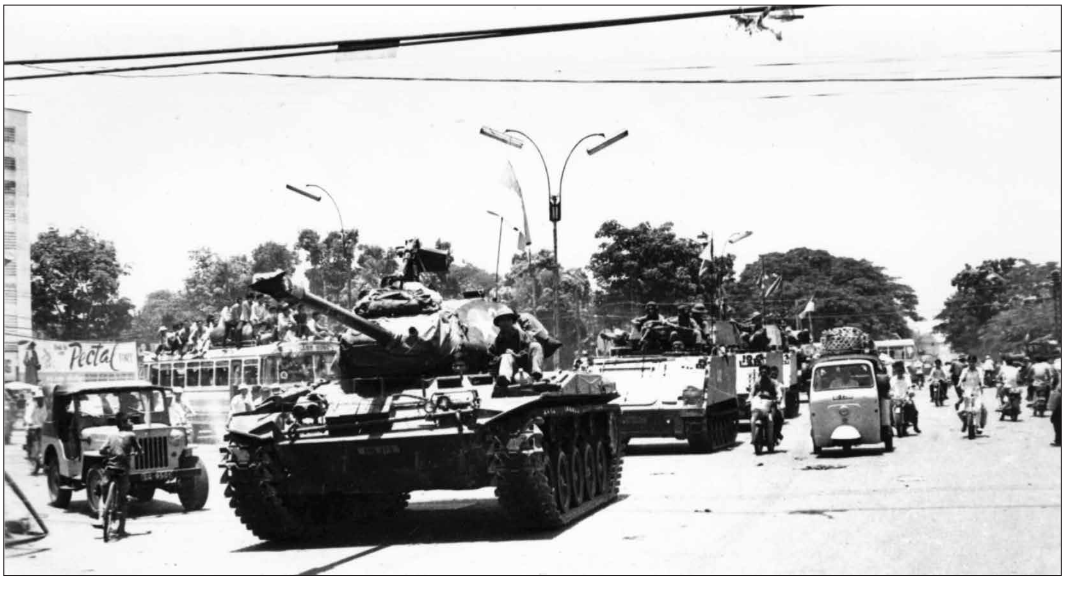
Destroyed and abandoned ARVN M113s and an M48 at Saigon's eastern gate. (PAVN)



The PAVN 203rd Armoured Brigade finally captured the Presidential Palace at 12:15, 30 April 1975. (PAVN)



Meanwhile, the PAVN 1st SAC also entered Saigon from the northern part of the city. This T-54 of the 202nd Armoured Brigade is seen passing a knocked out M42. (PAVN)



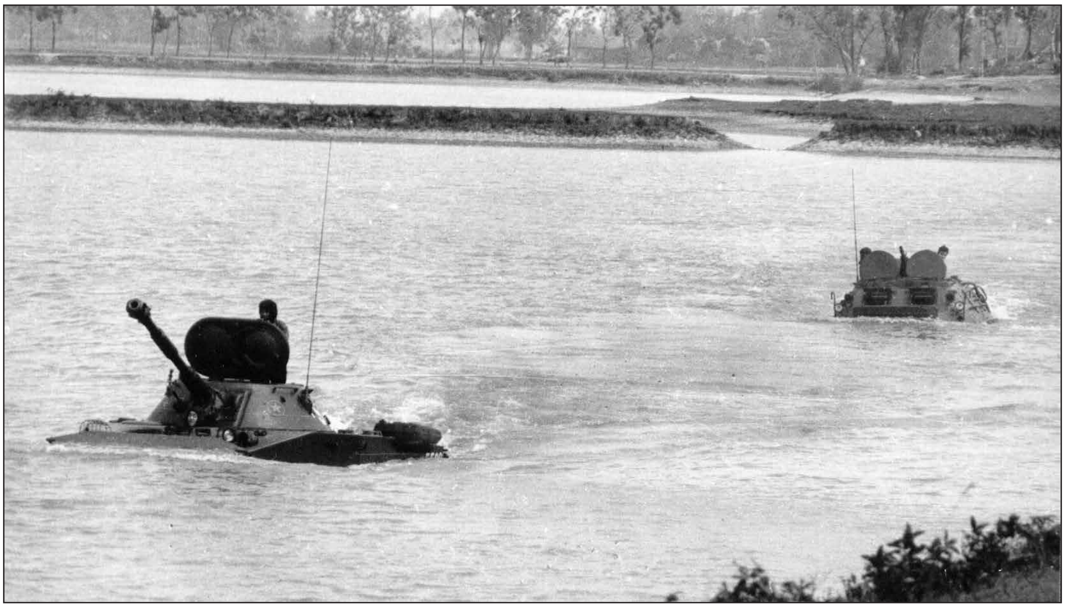
After capturing Tan Son Nhut AB, the PAVN 3rd SAC also entered Saigon's downtown, with the armour of the 273rd Armoured Regiment in the lead with captured M41s and M113s. (PAVN)

Group 232 also converged on Saigon's centre after overwhelming the last resistance at the National Police Headquarters. (PAVN)

8

AFTERMATH

In the Mekong Delta, where more than half of South Vietnam's population lived, the surrender took the local authorities by surprise as the South Vietnamese still held the region firmly, and no major cities had fallen. When the surrender was announced, most units laid down their weapons, but others continued to resist. The commander of the ARVN IV Corps in Can Tho, Major General Nguyen Khoa Nam, committed suicide rather than surrendering. His deputy, Brigadier General Le Van Hung, the hero of the siege of An Loc in 1972, also killed himself. Leaderless, some ARVN units continued to resist, the North Vietnamese immediately redeploying their forces to overcome them. The PAVN 4th Division finally captured Can Tho as well as the nearby Binh Thuy airbase. At My Tho, it was not until the evening of 30 April that the town was taken by the PAVN 1st Regiment, 8th Division, destroying the last elements of the ARVN 6th ACS. The PAVN 5th Division then tried unsuccessfully to seize Tan An where the defenders were supported by some river boats. The swampy terrain made it difficult for tanks to approach. On 30 April, at around 8 p.m., the 45th Tank Company, 26th Armoured Group, came in support with a dozen PT-76s and six BTR-60s which swam up the Vam Co Tay River in amphibious mode for more than 20km. Their daring approach took the enemy positions from the rear side and the tanks engaged and sank several boats, capturing the city at dawn. This was the latest brilliant action of the North Vietnamese Armoured Corps, which campaigned at a breakneck pace and conquered South Vietnam in 55 days. The mop-up operations in the Delta and elsewhere continued for several more weeks, crushing the last organised ARVN resistance.



The 45th Tank Company, 26th Armoured Group, came in support with a dozen PT-76s and six BTR-60s of the PAVN 5th Division to seize Tan An in the Mekong Delta area. The amphibious armour swam up the Vam Co Tay River for more than 20km and took the defenders by surprise, engaging in a unique duel with VNN gunboats. (PAVN)

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Captured V100s entered Can Tho, in the Mekong Delta, where the South Vietnamese had planned to transfer their government after evacuating Saigon. (PAVN)

The last act of the war for the North Vietnamese in their effort to impose their rule on the last South Vietnamese territories was the conquest of the outlying islands in the Gulf of Siam and some of the Spratly archipelago. Phu Quoc Island was first occupied on 30 April without much resistance, but the main effort was focused on the Spratly Islands claimed by Hanoi and garrisoned by ARVN troops. The preliminary operations took place on 12 April when the 126th Naval Assault Sapper Regiment was transported from Da Nang by the ships of the Navy 125th Boat Regiment to attack Song Tu Tay Island (Southwest Cay Island). The small garrison of 36 men was easily overwhelmed. On 25 April, a landing party captured Son Ca Island. Finally, between 27 and 30 April, the North Vietnamese seized Nam Yet, Sinh Ton (Namyit Island), and the other islands still held by ARVN. Con Son Island, southeast of Vung Tau, was the last to be conquered on 2 May by elements of the PAVN 3rd Division, supported by captured VNAF UH-1H helicopters. Four days later, troops from the 1st Regiment, 330th Division, were rushed in by UH-1H and CH-47A helicopters to Phu Quoc Island to help to repel a Khmer Rouge landing party in one of the first clashes opposing the former Communist allies.

While the US Embassy had made much of intelligence rumours that, after victory, the North Vietnamese would engage in wholesale slaughter, there were no mass killings of the sort perpetrated in Hue in 1968 or by the Khmer Rouge after the fall of Phnom Penh. Retribution, though, was still heavy. Reports of executions abound. The 38th Ranger Battalion, attempting to retreat from Tay Ninh was blocked on Route 1 by the 316th Division. The unit refused to surrender and fought until the end. Its commander, Major Tran Dinh Tu, was promptly executed when caught. Colonel Ho Ngoc Can, the province chief of Chuong Thien, and Soldier of the Year 1972, fought until he ran out of ammunition; he was also executed shortly thereafter. Numerous police officers, particularly in the villages of the Mekong Delta, were shot to death by vengeful partisans. However, outright executions were not in the Communist agenda. Instead, Hanoi considerably expanded its prison system of "re-education camps" that sprouted up across the countryside. Hundreds of thousands of military and civilian South Vietnamese prisoners worked hard labour in the jungle with little food, medicine, or clothing. The death toll was in the thousands. Many officers holding the rank of major or higher were not released until 1987. The more recalcitrant were severely punished, especially those whose units fought until the end. Several ARVN generals, including Le Minh Dao who fought so tenaciously at Xuan Loc, were not released until 1992, 17 years after the war's end. Even released, they and their families continued to be under strict security scrutiny.

For many Western journalists, the fact that Saigon suffered little damage was the proof that the South Vietnamese armed forces crumbled without much resistance. This impression continues until today, suiting well the American public perception that whatever the efforts made in Vietnam, they would be in vain in support of a weak, corrupt, and incompetent institution. Certainly, there were many

North Vietnamese troops entering Ca Mau, on the southern tip of Vietnam. It took the Communists several more weeks to crush the last ARVN resistance in the Mekong Delta. (PAVN)

hurdles that weakened the ARVN's overall operational capabilities. The most important was the fragmented high command structure, with a system of Corps commanders directly placed under the command of President Nguyen Van Thieu. The Joint General Staff had in reality no real command authority over them, functioning mainly as a logistic organisation. Consequently, there was no real coordination between Corps and no nationwide strategy. But at the onset of the Paris Accords of January 1973, the South Vietnamese armed forces had become a credible force that continued to prove repeatedly its superiority against PAVN during the next two years. Without the drastic reduction in US aid, the ARVN could probably have prevailed, forcing Hanoi to reconsider its strategy.

On their side, the North Vietnamese centralised command system proved its superiority in planning and coordinating the overall nationwide offensive of the spring of 1975. PAVN also made tremendous progress in large-scale, combined-arms mechanised operations, particularly in the use of its armoured units. Strategically, Hanoi's leadership correctly analysed the new geopolitical context and fully exploited what it called the "window of opportunity" to switch back to a military solution rather than hoping to grab power through a coalition government in the South. The United States was then in both economic and political crisis in the wake of the Watergate Affair that led Washington to reconsider its foreign policy. With a hostile public opinion to any new involvement in Vietnam, President Ford resigned himself to abandon South Vietnam to its fate. For the Americans, the main reasoning to intervene in Indochina since 1950, which was the "containment of China" policy, had now been achieved with the normalisation of the relationships with Beijing currently taking place since 1972. It was in fact a turning point in the Cold War as both the United States and China concurrently considered the Soviet Union as their main adversary. However, the fall of Saigon was a setback for the credibility of American foreign policy as an ally for the next two decades. "No more Vietnam" was the main motto for the Pentagon in formulating clear aims, with a well-defined exit policy, if the United States had to intervene again in a foreign conflict. Unfortunately, the new interventions taking place at the beginning of twenty-first century in Afghanistan and Middle East seemed to witness again all the hurdles of the ill-defined decisions taken during the Vietnam War. Ironically, the "nation building" efforts that many found as a failure for South Vietnam were in fact, in hindsight, a partial success. South Vietnam as a state was becoming a viable entity that crumbled not internally, but only after being abandoned by Washington and after continuous fighting since the Paris Accords against a well-armed conventional foreign army, that could be compared with the sudden collapse of the American supported Afghan government in December 2021.

Contrary to what many historians in the West have since hinted, the final offensive to capture Saigon was not an easy milk run for the Communists. If Lieutenant General Nguyen Van Toan had stayed at his post as CO of the III Corps, and if Lieutenant General Ngo Quang Truong had been nominated as the head of the JGS, with these two best ARVN tacticians commanding, the battle for Saigon would have been far more difficult and bloody for the North Vietnamese. The unconditional surrender indeed spared many lives. Recent Communist data, probably understated, thus recognised that in three days, from April 28 to 30, their forces lost 6,000 men and 33 tanks in the final drive to conquer Saigon. Later, the former commander of the PAVN 10th Division stated in an interview in 2005 that his unit suffered over 400 casualties in those days and that the "enemy was not waiting us with the red carpet".

For several more months, the Communist maintained the fiction of an independent "South Vietnamese government" under the National Liberation Front, probably for the benefit of Beijing who favoured a "Southern Communist – Neutralist" coalition in the rechristened Ho Chi Minh City. But it appeared that practically all the directives came from Hanoi and the non-Communist element within the NLF were quickly purged. On 2 July 1976, both South and North Vietnam were merged officially, with Hanoi as capital. For the Hanoi Politburo, the fall of Saigon marked the victorious end of the 30-year-long struggle for the independence and complete rule of the country under Communist domination. Their members suffered incredible hardship but stubbornly fought on. Senior General Vo Nguyen Giap shaped from scratch a band of poorly armed guerrillas into a modern conventional army. The PAVN indeed also suffered terrible losses but always recovered and fought on courageously.

The official Communist Vietnamese sources released in March 2017 indicated that some 1,146,250 PAVN troops were killed during the period between 1945 to 1975, including some 849,018 during the war against the United States.

During the offensive, the North Vietnamese captured a vast quantity of equipment, including around 300 tanks, 1,200 APCs, 1,300 artillery pieces, 42,000 trucks, and over 2 million infantry weapons. There were also 940 ships and 877 aircraft. Even if ammunition and spare parts were lacking for many of these weapon systems, a great part of them were added to the PAVN inventory. Sadly, peace did not come. Tensions soon flared up with neighbouring Cambodia under Khmer Rouge rule, followed by an outright Chinese invasion in 1979.

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